

THE INFLUENCE OF IDEALISM ON THE APOLOGETICS OF CORNELIUS VAN TIL

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Cornelius Van Til completed his doctoral work at Princeton University in 1927 with a dissertation entitled "God and the Absolute," in which he argued that the God of Christian theism could not be identified with the Absolute of philosophical idealism.¹ A couple of years earlier he had completed his Th.M. at Princeton Theological Seminary, with a thesis entitled "Reformed Epistemology."² In spite of the close proximity and historical relationship of these two institutions, they were clearly distinct, with the seminary then being a much more conservative institution. The philosophy department of Princeton University at that time was under the direction of the British idealist Archibald Allen Bowman. Van Til's own interest in philosophy, and in particular idealism, had begun during his undergraduate days at Calvin College. There the philosophy department had consisted of only one instructor, W. Harry Jellema, who was himself only a couple of years older than Van Til, and was at the very beginning of his teaching career.³ Jellema began teaching at Calvin in 1920, while working on his dissertation on Josiah Royce at the University of Michigan, which he completed in 1922. One of the textbooks which he used for the undergraduate courses in philosophy at Calvin was F. H. Bradley's *Appearance and Reality*, to which Van Til would continue to refer in his later writings on idealist philosophy.

With this background and interest it would be expected that philosophy would play a major role for Van Til in the development of his apologetics. That it does, but in this case it was not an uncritical appropriation. Rather, it will be shown that a major part of his apologetical endeavor can be seen

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¹ The dissertation is discussed below.

² This thesis was later revised and expanded into the student syllabus called "The Metaphysics of Apologetics," eventually published in 1969 by Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing as *The Survey of Christian Epistemology*.

³ Biographical information on Jellema is taken from the foreword to *Faith and Philosophy: Philosophical Studies in Religion and Ethics* (ed. Alvin Plantinga; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), which is a collection of essays in honor of Jellema's retirement at the age of seventy. He spent most of his career at Calvin, with the exception of twelve years at Indiana University (1935-1947; he chaired the department for the last seven years). Among the contributors to the collection of essays were Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas P. Wolterstorff, and Jesse DeBoer (elsewhere a severe critic of Van Til, as seen below). Henry Stob noted in the foreword that Jellema was not a prolific writer and had published little, but that he was an excellent teacher and an emphatically Christian philosopher.

as directed against philosophical idealism. On the other hand, his interest in philosophy and background in idealism helped him frame some of the basic questions his apologetical approach attempted to answer.

The thesis of this article is that idealism provided Van Til a framework for problems to be dealt with, and thus provides a reference for understanding his apologetical approach. However, this usage of idealism also provides a potential limitation on the continuing applicability of certain aspects of Van Til's apologetics.

I. IDEALISM AS A SOURCE OF CORRUPTION?

The major criticism raised against Van Til during the 1940s and 1950s was that he was corrupting the Christian message with idealist philosophy. J. Oliver Buswell gave the earliest extended critique of this concern in his article "The Fountainhead of Presuppositionalism." In this lengthy review of Van Til's book *Common Grace*, Buswell went so far as to charge Van Til with being "deeply mired in Hegelian idealistic pantheism,"⁴ and even stated, "Van Til's doctrine of creation is a mere non-temporal mental act of God which does not give substantive ontological status to the thing created, other than the thought of God."⁵ He seemed to have based his objections on such specifics as Van Til's analysis of the One and Many problem of philosophy in relation to Christian faith,⁶ the use of various idealist philosophical terms such as "concrete universal," "limiting concept," "brute fact," and "apparent

⁴ J. Oliver Buswell, "The Fountainhead of Presuppositionalism." *TBT* 42/2 (1948) 48. Backing up Buswell's analysis of Van Til was a letter he received and published from Dr. G. Douglas Young, a former student of Van Til, who concluded, "I feel that it would help the readers of *The Bible Today* very materially in their attempt to understand the importance of this controversy if you would present to them the story of how subtly the false teachings of Borden P. Bowne (Personalist Idealist) worked their way into Christian circles through the teaching of evangelical men. That is what is happening while this controversy is going on. I am very sure that many of your readers are totally unaware of this aspect of the whole matter." Douglas Young, "Professor Young's Letter," *TBT* 42/2 (November 1948) 65. Young was the chairman of the Department of OT at the National Bible Institute in New York, which also published *The Bible Today*, of which Buswell was the editor.

Buswell and Van Til had had their disagreements over a period of time. When the Orthodox Presbyterian Church was started in 1936 following the discipline of J. Gresham Machen over the issue of missions support in the PCUSA, both men were among the founding members, but were on opposite sides when a split occurred the following year. The second General Assembly made an attempt to reconcile the two factions, as evidenced by the fact that Buswell was elected moderator following his nomination by Van Til. Unfortunately, the attempt failed, and the "New School fundamentalists," including Buswell, withdrew under the leadership of Carl McIntire, while the "Old School" remained, under the leadership of the professors at Westminster Theological Seminary. The stress from this further division may have contributed to Machen's untimely death from pneumonia in 1937. See George M. Marsden, "Perspective on the Division of 1937," in *Pressing Toward the Mark: Essays Commemorating Fifty Years of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (ed. Charles G. Dennison and Richard C. Gamble; Philadelphia: The Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1986) 169-82. The immediate issues were disagreements over premillennialism and prohibition, which were strongly supported by the fundamentalist faction as essential, but seen as issues of Christian liberty by the "Old School" confessionalists.

⁵ Buswell, "Fountainhead" 56.

⁶ This is a problem only for a "monistic non-Christian philosophy" according to Buswell (*ibid.* 43).

contradiction," and the suggestion of a Christian use of an "as if" concept. Buswell insisted on reading all of these terms and concepts in the context of their non-Christian origin and meaning, regardless of Van Til's usage or context. He concluded that Van Til's presuppositional philosophy was "strongly characterized by anti-Biblical Hegelian dialectic terminology and concepts."⁷ He consequently charged Van Til with a major problem of compromise with, and corruption by, idealist philosophy.

A series of articles in the *Calvin Forum* during the mid-1950s continued a similar critique of Van Til's apologetics. This campaign was started with a lead editorial by Cecil DeBoer in the August-September 1953 issue. His complaints against Van Til's apologetics revolved around two basic issues: he accused Van Til of poor scholarship both in his summary of other's positions and in his use of philosophical terms, and also accused him of adopting anti-Christian idealist concepts. For example, he wrote, "In asserting that the givens with which we must begin are not facts but 'God-interpreted facts,' the new apologetic seems to have taken over uncritically the idealist theory of knowledge and truth, a theory leading logically to a kind of pantheism."⁸ The charge of idealism seemed to be the more troubling of the two errors, inasmuch as some of the disagreement over terminology and interpretation could be seen as due to an underlying philosophical disagreement.

The most extensive treatment of Van Til's use of philosophy was provided by Jesse DeBoer, a professor of philosophy at the University of Kentucky. His article, "Professor Van Til's Apologetics," was divided into three parts.⁹ His repeated emphasis was on Van Til's use of idealist terminology and logic. He made such statements as "I mean only to say that his language is idealistic, and that by choosing to use such language he chooses to make idealistic, non-Christian statements."¹⁰ He further charged, "Van Til is more certain of idealist logic than he is of Christian theism."¹¹ His final conclusion was that "Van Til's apologetic is twisted and victimized by the categories and techniques of the idealists whose works he read in his student days."¹² These

⁷ Ibid. 64.

⁸ Cecil DeBoer, "The New Apologetic," *The Calvin Forum* 19 (August-September 1953) 3. This series of negative articles represented a departure within the pages of *The Calvin Forum*, inasmuch as the only extended treatment of Van Til prior to this time had been an article by John Vriend, "How Do We Know?" *The Calvin Forum* 18 (October 1952) 34-37, which had summarized and recommended Van Til's epistemology. In addition to reflecting a split of opinion within the Christian Reformed Church, this particular controversy may have been triggered by the fact that Van Til taught at Calvin Theological Seminary for a term in 1952, and thus had thrust himself into the spotlight within his former denomination.

⁹ Jesse DeBoer, "Professor Van Til's Apologetics, Part I: A Linguistic Bramble Patch," *The Calvin Forum* 19 (August-September 1953) 7-12; "Professor Van Til's Apologetics, Part II: God and Human Knowledge," *The Calvin Forum* 19 (October 1955) 27-34; and "Professor Van Til's Apologetics, Part III: God and Human Knowledge," *The Calvin Forum* 19 (November 1953) 51-57. Jesse DeBoer, like Van Til, had studied at Calvin College, but had done his graduate work in philosophy at the University of Illinois (A.M.) and Harvard (Ph.D.)

¹⁰ J. DeBoer, "Part I" 11.

¹¹ Ibid. 12.

¹² J. DeBoer, "Part III" 57.

were strong statements coming from a professional philosopher and Christian academician. However, it also becomes clear in reading DeBoer's articles that he was writing from the philosophical perspective of the analytical movement in philosophy, which had reacted strongly against the earlier British idealism which Van Til had studied. Thus, he was initially unsympathetic to the philosophical issues with which Van Til was grappling, and found it easy to dismiss them as "non-Christian." As a result, what could have been an insightful analysis reads more like an intramural philosophical polemic. DeBoer showed no evidence of having read any of Van Til's analyses of the idealist philosophers who were said to have corrupted his apologetics.

A further critique of Van Til's apologetics by a "professional philosopher" was offered by Clifton Orlebeke, then an instructor in philosophy at the University of Rhode Island. His article, "On Brute Facts," is a less polemical, though still highly critical, analysis of Van Til's epistemology.¹³ He called attention to a couple of important points in the debate. First, Van Til had criticized some of the authorities of the Christian Reformed Church, notably Kuyper, Bavinck, and Hepp, especially in their understanding of the absolute ethical antithesis and the related issue of common ground. Second, he noted ambiguity in Van Til's language about the relationship of the knowledge which God has and the beingness of created facts. Without making the actual charge as Buswell and DeBoer had done, Orlebeke implied that some of Van Til's statements would lead in the direction of pantheistic idealism.

The charges of idealist corruption were continued by Franklin Van Halsema a few months later.¹⁴ He stated that Van Til failed to achieve a Calvinistic or Christian apologetic due to his idealistic penchant. In particular, he pointed to Van Til's use of the "limiting concept," a Berkeleyan God in his theology, his use of a coherence theory, and his holding to a phenomenalist epistemology. Van Halsema admitted that his analysis involved a one-sided reading of Van Til, and that opposite positions could be supported, but concluded that, at best, this indicated an unfortunate contradiction within Van Til's writings.

Further disagreements with Van Til's apologetics were expressed in articles by William Masselink and William Paul the following year (1954), but these dealt with non-philosophical issues.¹⁵ At the end of the year an article

¹³ Clifton J. Orlebeke, "On Brute Facts," *The Calvin Forum* 19 (August-September 1953) 13-17. Note that there were three articles in one issue which were highly critical of Van Til's apologetics.

¹⁴ Franklin Van Halsema, "Van Til in Review," *The Calvin Forum* 19 (December 1953) 82-85.

¹⁵ William Masselink, "New Views Regarding Common Grace," *The Calvin Forum* 19 (April 1954) 172-77; "New Views of Common Grace in the Light of Historic Reformed Theology," *The Calvin Forum* 19 (May 1954) 194-204; William Paul, "The Methodology of Christian Evidences," *The Calvin Forum* 19 (May 1954) 204-8; "The Methodology of Christian Evidences II," *The Calvin Forum* 19 (June-July 1954) 222-26; "The Methodology of Christian Evidences III," *The Calvin Forum* 20 (August-September 1954) 9-12. Masselink's articles dealt directly with Van Til's views on Common Grace and were consistent with Masselink's own earlier works, *Common Grace and Christian Education*, or *A Calvinistic Philosophy of Science* (mimeographed, 1952) and *General Revelation and Common Grace: A Defense of the Historic Reformed Faith over against the Theology and Philosophy of the So-called Reconstructionist Movement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953). These works established him as an opponent of Van Til in defending both the "Old Princeton"

by Edwin H. Palmer appeared defending Van Til against Masselink, entitled "Caricature."¹⁶ A defense of Van Til's philosophical views finally appeared in 1955, with a two-part article "On Brute Facts" by Harold J. Franz.¹⁷ This article responded directly to Orlebeke's criticisms and concluded that "Mr. Orlebeke is really in agreement with Dr. Van Til even though philosophically less mature." Franz also defended Kuyper against Van Til's criticisms by a similar method, noting that Kuyper's "formal agreement" between the believer and unbeliever paralleled Van Til's epistemological-metaphysical distinction regarding common ground.¹⁸

In 1954 James Daane, a minister in the Christian Reformed Church, published *A Theology of Grace: An Inquiry Into and Evaluation of Dr. C. Van Til's Doctrine of Common Grace*.¹⁹ The editors of *The Calvin Forum* invited a number of theologians to respond to this work, and the results were published in the April 1955 issue. Although the author under discussion was Daane, the real issue at hand was Van Til. Of those who responded, two supported Daane and two supported Van Til.²⁰ Cecil DeBoer again wrote the lead editorial, stating that the earlier articles of 1953 had not attempted to "call in question the soundness of Van Til's personal theological beliefs, but only to point out that his philosophical justification of those beliefs left much to be desired."²¹ Raymond Oppewall wrote in his contribution,

and "Amsterdam" theologians against Van Til's criticisms. Only the second article of Paul dealt directly with Van Til, but his entire evidentialist approach contrasted with Van Til's presuppositional views.

¹⁶ Edwin H. Palmer, "Caricature," *The Calvin Forum* 20 (November 1954) 62-65. His position, which seems accurate to me, is that Masselink had misread Van Til and had as a result constructed a straw man to attack; but in reality, his position was "much closer to Van Til than he realizes."

¹⁷ Harold J. Franz, "On Brute Facts," *The Calvin Forum* 20 (March 1955) 150-53; "On Brute Facts (continued)," *The Calvin Forum* 20 (April 1955) 182-86.

¹⁸ Van Til argued that "epistemologically," i.e. on the level of interpretation, believers and unbelievers, in principle, have nothing in common (an application of Kuyper's notion of antithesis), but that "metaphysically," i.e. on the level of the reality of existence, they share everything in common. The antithesis in interpretation was limited by the important phrase, "in principle." His point was also that in practice, the unbeliever is unable to be consistent in his own interpretation. See Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1972) 5.

¹⁹ See James Daane, *A Theology of Grace: An Inquiry Into and Evaluation of Dr. C. Van Til's Doctrine of Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954).

²⁰ "Daane's *A Theology of Grace: A Symposium*," *The Calvin Forum* 20 (April 1955) 172-81. Raymond Oppewall and Leonard Verduin both supported Daane's critique of Van Til, while Edward Heerema and William Young dismissed it. Heerema made use of the same defense Van Til would shortly use, namely defending the doctrine of the eternal decree of God against Daane's apparent disagreement with it. Young, without defending Van Til's apologetics, stated, "Daane pursues a line of argument which appears to embody a sustained misunderstanding of Van Til's views" (p. 179).

²¹ Cecil DeBoer, "The Daane Reviews: I," *The Calvin Forum* 20 (April 1955) 171. DeBoer gave Van Til an apparent out when he wrote, "Van Til's personal beliefs may be quite in order, but he evidently has great difficulty making this clear in the language of philosophy. And that, incidentally, may account for the fact that his critics so frequently 'misunderstand' him. In other words, by reason of his inaccurate use of the language of philosophy and his failure to express himself in unambiguous English, he may virtually have caricatured his own position which—let us assume for argument's sake—may be wholly Reformed" (p. 171).

The fundamental thesis of the book may be rather simply summarized. As Daane tells us in the preface he is concerned that we see two things: (1) That while Van Til has attempted to deliver the common-grace views of others from non-Christian philosophical remnants, he has himself enmeshed the doctrine of common grace in a compound of Hegelian rationalism and modern existentialism. (2) That as a result of this philosophical structure Van Til's alleged refinement of the Three Points of 1924 is in fact a repudiation of the Three Points.²²

Opperwall went on to summarize and defend Daane's analysis of Van Til, but did not evidence any familiarity with Van Til beyond the work being reviewed by Daane.

Amazingly enough, Daane himself had an article published in that same April 1955 issue of *The Calvin Forum* which included the symposium on his book. The article was entitled "An Inherited Epistemology: I."²³ This was a review article of Alexander DeJong's book, *The Well-Meant Offer*. DeJong had been a student of Van Til, and Daane used this review to once again attack Van Til's position (DeJong's epistemology was "inherited" from Van Til). Daane's basic analysis was that whatever was of value in DeJong was due to his independence of Van Til, but that whatever was in error, which was the bulk, was due to his adoption of a Van Tillian framework for his theology. The opening line of the article read, "There is a strange reluctance to face the issues of Professor C. Van Til's theology."²⁴ This is a curious line for a publication which had published numerous articles critical of Van Til over a three-year period!²⁵

By now it should be clear that much of the controversy regarding Van Til's apologetics revolved around the question of his use of idealist philosophy. Obviously, he had studied idealism and had made use of a number of idealist terms and concepts in his writings. One basic question at issue seemed to be whether or not he meant the same thing in his usage as the idealists had in their context. In order to get a better perspective on this issue it will be necessary to summarize briefly some of the idealist teachings and then to turn to Van Til's own interaction with idealist philosophy, beginning with his doctoral dissertation, "God and the Absolute," and then looking at the collection of essays he published in 1955 to answer his critics, *Christianity and Idealism*.

²² "Symposium" 172.

²³ James Daane, "An Inherited Epistemology: I," *The Calvin Forum* 20 (April 1955) 186-92; "An Inherited Theology: II," *The Calvin Forum* 20 (May 1955) 204-8. The second article continues the review of DeJong's book. It should be noted that the entire April 1955 issue of *The Calvin Forum* was devoted to articles that dealt with Van Til.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 186.

²⁵ There were numerous letters to the editor during this time, some of which defended Van Til, others supporting his critics, but some which simply expressed the opinion that there were other issues to deal with besides one man's approach to apologetics. For example, one wrote, "I trust too, that poor Dr. Van Til at Westminster has been dragged across the *Forum* pages for the last time and will be permitted to rest awhile." C. S. Hoveland, "From Our Correspondents," *The Calvin Forum* 20 (March 1955) 162—this was published the month before the Daane symposium! However, the controversy ceased for a time, as Cecil DeBoer, the editor-in-chief, passed away in 1956. When no replacement could be found, *The Calvin Forum* itself ceased publication.

II. THE BRITISH IDEALISTS

The idealists with whom Van Til interacted the most in his writings were the British philosophers Francis Herbert Bradley, Bernard Bosanquet, and Andrew Seth Pringle-Pattison, although he also dealt with quite a number of other figures to a lesser degree. Bradley (1846–1924) had been a fellow of Merton College, Oxford, and had devoted his career to philosophical writing. His most important writing was *Appearance and Reality*, which originally appeared in 1893 and was revised in 1897.²⁶ The second edition added several appendices to answer critics of the first edition. The argument of the book fell into two unequal sections. The first section, about one-fourth of the whole, examined various aspects of appearance and concluded that they were all self-contradictory, and hence could not be ultimate Reality. The second section then developed what Reality must be, including his discussion of the degrees of truth and reality, and culminated in his doctrine that all contradictions must be subsumed within the Absolute. While Bradley was clearly working within the idealist tradition in philosophy, he constantly made an appeal to experience and claimed to be developing a philosophy that would be consistent with our experience.

Bosanquet (1848–1923) had taught for a decade at Oxford, but later moved to London and had been involved in teaching in adult education there. He also taught at St. Andrews for a time. He wrote in numerous areas of philosophy, including logic, metaphysics, and social and political philosophy. While his name was frequently linked with Bradley, and their careers coincided so that they interacted a great deal with each other, their views were somewhat different.²⁷ Bosanquet was generally considered to be more Hegelian than Bradley. Van Til reacted particularly to his major work on logic, *Logic, or the Morphology of Knowledge*,²⁸ but reacted to several other writings as well.

Pringle-Pattison²⁹ (1856–1931) represented a move within idealism away from the absolutism of Bradley and Bosanquet toward a greater emphasis on the individual. Much of his writing consisted of the analysis of other philosophers. Of particular interest to Van Til were his works *Hegelianism and*

²⁶ Francis Herbert Bradley, *Appearance and Reality: A Metaphysical Essay* (2d ed.; Oxford: Clarendon, 1955 [1897]).

²⁷ See Jonathan Robinson, "Bradley and Bosanquet," *Idealistic Studies* 10 (1980) 1–23. Robinson argues that there was a profound and basic disagreement between the two throughout their careers, so that they could in no sense be considered to represent jointly a school of thought. He may be overstating the case somewhat in reaction to the many authors who have merely lumped the two together as the typical representatives of "British idealism." Van Til was more concerned with the general tendencies and assumptions of idealism and not so much with the niceties of distinctions as an idealist philosopher might be. One such sweeping generality that would fit Van Til himself is the tendency to take a sweeping view of the whole rather than a detailed analysis of a particular (which would be more the tendency of the analytic philosophy which reacted against idealism).

²⁸ Bernard Bosanquet, *Logic, or the Morphology of Knowledge*, 2 vols. (2d ed.; Oxford: Clarendon, 1911 [New York: Kraus Reprint, 1968]).

²⁹ Andrew Seth adopted the surname Pringle-Pattison in 1898 in order to inherit a family estate in Scotland. Thus his writings can be found under both names.

*Personality*³⁰ and *The Idea of God in the Light of Recent Philosophy*.³¹ The latter book especially dealt with Pringle-Pattison's continuity with, and divergence from, the views of Bradley and Bosanquet. Pringle-Pattison, unlike Bradley and Bosanquet, clearly identified himself as being within the Christian tradition and made use of Christian terms and doctrines in his argumentation.³² For example, he wrote,

The essential feature of the Christian conception of the world, in contrast to the Hellenic, may be said to be that it regards the person and the relations of persons to one another as the essence of reality, whereas Greek thought conceived of personality, however spiritual, as a restrictive characteristic of the finite—a transitory product of a life which as a whole is impersonal. Modern Absolutism seems, in this respect, to revert to the pre-Christian mode of conception. . . .³³

Among the modern Absolutists whom he clearly had in mind were Bradley and Bosanquet.

One of the issues debated within idealist philosophy had been the relationship between the Absolute, as that concept was developed in the idealist tradition from Hegel down through Bradley and Bosanquet, and the God of Theism or Christianity, as the doctrine had been traditionally taught in the Church. Bradley and many others explicitly denied that these terms were identical in reference. For example, Bradley wrote,

If you identify the Absolute with God, that is not the God of religion. If again you separate them, God becomes a finite factor in the Whole. And the effort of religion is to put an end to, and break down, this relation—a relation which, none the less, it essentially presupposes. Hence, short of the Absolute, God cannot rest, and, having reached that goal, he is lost and religion with him. . . . God must certainly be conscious of himself in religion, but such self-consciousness is most imperfect.³⁴

For Bradley, any religious concept of God must be less than the whole of Reality, and hence must be finite and not equal to the Absolute.

³⁰ Andrew Seth, *Hegelianism and Personality* (Balfour Philosophical Lectures, University of Edinburgh; repr. New York: Burt Franklin, 1971 [1887]). This series of lectures followed up on issues raised in a previous series, published as *Scottish Philosophy: A Comparison of the Scottish and German Answers to Hume* (Balfour Philosophical Lectures, University of Edinburgh; Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1885). Note that these were both published prior to Pringle-Pattison's change of name.

³¹ Andrew Seth Pringle-Pattison, *The Idea of God in the Light of Recent Philosophy* (The Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of Aberdeen in the Years 1912 and 1913; Oxford: Clarendon, 1917).

³² In this he reminds one somewhat of Hegel, who also made use of the Trinity and the Incarnation in his philosophy, although there are also clear differences. Bradley and Bosanquet did not refer back to Christian doctrines in this way.

³³ Pringle-Pattison, *The Idea of God* 291. For Van Til, Pringle-Pattison exemplified the attempt to use Idealist philosophy to reinterpret Christianity. For example, in this work Pringle-Pattison defended the notion of creation, but it turned out to be the old Hellenistic idea of an eternal creation, in which God and the universe are correlate, each necessary for the other. Thus his many orthodox-sounding statements have only a "formal" similarity, due to the reinterpretation of their meaning. See the discussion below of Van Til, "God and the Absolute."

³⁴ Bradley, *Appearance and Reality* 395–96.

Nonetheless, for many within the religious community, idealism was looked upon as a form of apologetics for belief in God, even for Christianity. Many of the "Hegelians of the Right" had viewed Hegel in this manner and had interpreted him in a highly theistic way. This approach continued, especially within liberal Christian circles, so that Van Til easily found proponents for identifying God with the Absolute among more contemporary authors. For example, W. H. Moberly published an essay entitled "God and the Absolute," in which he argued that philosophy and religion attack the same problem of the Being and Nature of God, only from different angles.³⁵ Thus while he recognized differences between the theological and philosophical views of God, he considered them to be on a converging path, so that an identification should be ultimately possible. For example, he found it to be a defect, albeit a correctable one, that Absolutism ultimately denied personality to God/the Absolute. He argued that such a denial is based on an inadequate view of personality.³⁶

Pringle-Pattison had a similar approach in *The Idea of God*, in which he argued against Bradley's impersonal Absolute as denying value to finite selves, and instead held to the self-communicating life of the Absolute. He wrote,

But although the individual may not make himself his own End, the world of finite individuals may well constitute the End of the Absolute. How can we ascribe to the Absolute, as many theologians have done, the self-centred life, the contemplation of His own glory, which spells moral death in the creature? Is it reasonable to deny of the fontal life of God that giving of Himself and finding of Himself in others, which we recognize as the perfection and fruition of the human life? This would be, under the pretext of exalting the divine, to place it lower than the best we know. . . . The idea of end or purpose may not be literally applicable in such a sphere, but we may at least say that just 'from the side of the Absolute' the meaning of the finite process must lie in the creation of a world of individual spirits; for to such alone can He reveal himself and from them receive the answering tribute of love and adoration.³⁷

Pringle-Pattison did not so much argue for the identification of the concepts of God and the Absolute as assume it. In the passage quoted, as well as elsewhere in the book, he used the terms interchangeably.

III. VAN TIL'S CRITIQUE OF IDEALISM

1. *God and the Absolute.* In his dissertation, "God and the Absolute," Van Til wrote against the view that Idealism provided a metaphysical defense of Christianity. In the introduction he clearly stated his thesis:

I shall in this paper attempt to prove that the apparent similarity between Idealism and Christianity covers a fundamental diversity, that consequently

³⁵ W. H. Moberly, "God and the Absolute," in *Foundation: A Statement of Christian Belief in Terms of Modern Thought*, by Seven Oxford Men (ed. B. H. Streeter; London: Macmillan, 1913) 423-524.

³⁶ Ibid. 504-5.

³⁷ Pringle-Pattison, *The Idea of God* 294-95.

we must make a choice between them and that the choice for Christianity is philosophically the more tenable. To do this it will be sufficient to take the pivotal conception of God which lies at the basis of all Christian theism and contend that it is the only conception that can offer a possible unity to human experience. The only alternative to belief in this God is scepticism.³⁸

Several major themes that can be found throughout Van Til's writings were apparent in this brief statement. First, he clearly saw a similarity between Idealism and Christianity and thus felt free to make use of Idealist terms. However, he also saw a fundamental difference which prevented a straightforward adoption of Idealism. Second, the basis of his apologetical system was already evident in that the Christian concept of God was said to be the only thing which could give unity (or meaning) to human experience. Third, he structured his argument to allow only two alternatives, Christianity and skepticism.

The flow of the argument within the dissertation was first to delineate the position of Pragmatism, with the conclusion that it failed to give intellectual satisfaction or any grounding for the rationality of human experience, as Idealism had attempted to do. However, Pragmatism took seriously the human experience of time and change, as Idealism had been unable to do. Then Van Til gave a brief outline of Christian Theism as the position he defended.³⁹ After that a lengthy analysis of Idealism followed, frequently noting its formal similarity with Theism, but also its ultimate divergence due to its differing underlying presuppositions. The final conclusion was that Christian Theism did justice to both the rationality of our experience and the reality of change and time in a way that the one-sided philosophies of Idealism and Pragmatism did not, and could not, do.

It would be useful to look at Van Til's procedure as well as his specific comments on Pragmatism and Idealism. In the opening pages he outlined his basic procedure:

Beginning with the simplest of data Christian Theism contends that they imply the existence of an Absolute God. The origin, preservation, and destiny of the phenomenal world have their explanation in God only. Without the conception of a selfsufficient God our human experience would be meaningless. It is well to note at once the nature of the argument; it is transcendental and not formally logical.⁴⁰

Thus he claimed to be using a "transcendental argument" rather than one based on formal logic. He stated that such an argument is indirect, based on arguing "from the impossibility of the opposite," and that it seeks for the presuppositions that make experience intelligible. Thus he went on to state,

Our metaphysics cannot be more *geometrici demonstrata* [sic]: you cannot prove your position to anyone unless you have completely comprehensive knowledge

³⁸ Cornelius Van Til, "God and the Absolute" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1927) 1-2.

³⁹ For Van Til in his dissertation, Theism or Christian Theism referred to the general position of Reformed Orthodoxy regarding the doctrine of God.

⁴⁰ Van Til, "God and the Absolute" 3. "Selfsufficient" and "Absolute" are used synonymously here; they both refer to the concept that God is not dependent on anything else in any way.

or at least are certainly on the way toward it. Accordingly, we do not seek to prove christian Theism [*sic*] but only try to show that we can find no meaning in our human experience unless there be a selfsufficient God to give it meaning.⁴¹

At this point he disclaimed an attempt to "prove" Christianity. Rather, his goal was to show that it is the more reasonable of two mutually exclusive options.⁴² Throughout the dissertation he returned to this point numerous times, that only by the assumption of the God of Christian Theism can human experience or reality be considered to have unity or meaningfulness.

Van Til briefly considered Pragmatism's critique of Idealism and concluded that Pragmatism reaches some correct negative conclusions, but for the wrong reasons, as Pragmatism itself is internally inconsistent. The basic objection of Pragmatism to Idealism that Van Til noted, and agreed with, is that Idealism does violence to our experience of time and change, as it attempts to force experience to fit its *a priori* logic. Thus Idealists such as McTaggart rejected the reality of time. Van Til also noted that the Idealist elevation of logic to the status of the ultimate category of explanation of reality would in the end lead to the correlativity of God and humanity, ultimately of all being.

Also, Van Til objected to Pragmatism's subjection of the intellect to the will and argued that neither is subservient to the other, but that there is a unity to the human organism. He further argued that Pragmatism assumes an untenable metaphysics when it attacks the Idealist metaphysics: "By denying the validity of metaphysics which begins with our experience and seeks for the presuppositions of it, Pragmatism found itself compelled to raise bare possibility to the highest thinkable metaphysical status."⁴³ In his view, Pragmatism depended on the assumption of indeterminism, which would leave no ultimate basis for rationality. His conclusion was that both Pragmatism and Idealism overemphasized one aspect of experience, the former the reality of time experience, the latter the human need to satisfy

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 4.

⁴² In his later apologetical writings, he would be less circumspect; there he would claim that there is an absolute proof of Christianity and refer to this transcendental argument. See *The Defense of the Faith* (3d ed.; Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1967) 103, where Van Til writes, "But the best and only possible proof for the existence of such a God is that his existence is required for the uniformity of nature and for the coherence of all things in the world. We cannot prove the existence of beams underneath a floor if by proof we mean that they must be ascertainable in the way that we can see the chairs and tables of the room. But the very idea of a floor as the support of tables and chairs requires the idea of beams that are underneath. But there would be no floor if no beams were underneath. Thus there is absolutely certain proof of the existence of God and the truth of Christian theism. Even non-Christians presuppose its truth while they verbally reject it. They need to presuppose the truth of Christian theism in order to account for their own accomplishments." Note the use of the transcendental form of argument in this statement. For further comments on this aspect of Van Til's thought, see Scott Oliphint, "The Consistency of Van Til's Methodology," *WTJ* 52 (1990) 27-49. This is one of a very few works that refer to Van Til's dissertation. Oliphint argues that Van Til continued to use a transcendental argument throughout his career, although he dropped that particular label in his later writings, where he preferred "argument by presupposition."

⁴³ Van Til, "God and the Absolute" 11. In the context of this quote Van Til was arguing against the positions of F. C. S. Schiller and William James.

reason. Both were wrong, as they failed to do justice to both aspects, and hence the need for a third alternative was established.

Van Til thus turned to establishing his argument for Christian Theism by the use of a transcendental argument. He noted that he began with the assumption of the validity of human knowledge, and proceeded to use reason to seek what presuppositions such knowledge implied.⁴⁴ He claimed to begin with assumptions similar to Pragmatism, but to arrive at conclusions similar to Idealism. His conclusion is worth reading at length:

Beginning as we did with the assumption of the validity of human knowledge we have found that this assumption implies the existence of a completely actual experience. Hence we can now say that human knowledge presupposes the Absolute. If our argument has been correct, then we have all the while been able to search for the Absolute because in reality the rationality of our experience with which we began finds its source in Him. We would not be able to bring the two together if they were not at bottom related; the rationality we possess would be meaningless without God. We would not be able to ask questions about the Absolute or about anything else without the Absolute being the source of our ability. Hence we shall from now on say that we must presuppose the Absolute of Theism if our experience is to have meaning not forgetting that we were driven to this presupposition by a transcendental argument that began with nothing more than what Pragmatism also takes for granted, namely, human organisms in a spatio-temporal environment.⁴⁵

Van Til went on to argue that, while the Theist did not claim to be able to explain all difficulties with his position, he had established the right to believe in an ultimate rationality.⁴⁶ He went on to derive the notion of a self-sufficient God by a transcendental argument. Thus his conclusions differed from those of the Idealists, in spite of their "formal" similarity.

Having developed his argument for Theism, Van Til turned to the basic problem of his dissertation, the criticism of Idealism. He began by stating, "We have already noticed that formally there is much similarity between Theism and Idealism; both hold to the priority of the actual to the potential. But it is noteworthy that the two systems hold to this priority chiefly for

⁴⁴ The similarity of this starting point to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* is obvious, as is the difference from Kant in the conclusion. This point will be discussed below.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 14.

⁴⁶ "When we said that the least experience of coherence implies complete rationality we did not imply that it is possible for human reason ever to attain to a comprehension of this rationality. Rather the contrary, all that we have accomplished is to win for ourselves the right to believe in a completely actual experience in whom the system of knowledge is" (Van Til, "God and the Absolute" 15). This line of argument would be later extended in Van Til's disagreement with Gordon Clark over the issue of the incomprehensibility of God. He made a further theological "deduction" when he wrote, "If the Absolute of Theism is therefore the most reasonable hypothesis for the explanation of the phenomenon of coherence in our experience it follows that all human knowledge is received from revelation. God reveals Himself in nature and man according to man's capacity. The essence of God is known to Himself completely but can never be so known by man, or man would have to be equal to God. Thus the idea of a transcendent God is basic to the idea of an immanent God. The term transcendence is of course from our side relative to the term immanence but that does not alter the fact that neither of them could for us have an intelligible connotation except upon the presupposition of a self-sufficient Absolute" (p. 16).

different reasons."⁴⁷ He noted that for Idealism, this was based on the analysis of the nature of judgment in logic, whereas for Theism, it was based on the notion that "the series of time experience is inexplicable without the presupposition of God."⁴⁸ The importance of this distinction is underscored if one remembers that by this point of the dissertation the concept of God had clearly been identified as that of orthodox Christianity, so that it included the notion of God as Creator. Van Til later explicitly developed this point.

In Van Til's view, Idealism had attempted to defend itself by the ambiguity of the term "Absolute." The Absolute generally referred to the Whole, but also could be employed in the sense of the Beyond. Bradley especially had made use of the latter sense in his metaphysics, in which the human self, space, and time had to be metamorphosed in order to be taken into the Absolute. In Van Til's view, this notion of Absolute as Beyond is the result of Idealism's a priorism. Theism also had a notion of God as Beyond, but for Van Til it differed because he had derived it by means of his transcendental argument. Thus it could allow for the reality of time. He wrote, "The purpose for which we have laid bare this acosmic strain in Idealism is to show that even here where it has the greatest possible formal resemblance to Theism it is at bottom not at all the same."⁴⁹

Van Til located the basic weakness of Idealism in its a priorism, which did not allow the possibility of doing justice to temporal experience and furthermore failed to use a transcendental argument for the necessity of the Absolute. He also noted its disregard of human limitations as he wrote, "We would hold then that the weakness of idealistic logic lies in its apriorism, its disregard of the fact that we as temporally and physically dependent beings cannot be certain that we have found laws of thought that must hold for all possible experience."⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Ibid. 18. Van Til reread a number of his major student writings late in life, after his retirement, and often made comments or corrections in them. The copy of his dissertation at the Westminster Theological Seminary has the word "Theism" crossed out and "Christianity" written above; the date 4/5/82 is written on the opposite page. The handwriting appears to be that of Van Til. However, this piece of editing was redundant; "Theism" was footnoted with the comment "We shall omit the adjective 'christian.'" Unlike some of his other writings, Van Til made no "retractions" in the margins of his dissertation.

Van Til returned several times in his dissertation to the apparent similarity between Theism and Idealism. For example, he wrote, "Throughout we have maintained that formally Idealism and Theism are in cordial agreement. 'If God is not then I am nothing,' to that both will readily give their assent. To the very last Bosanquet clung to the position that 'possibility is within the real, not reality within the possible.' Similarly E. Hocking says we exist knowing the Absolute and adds the significant and determining statement: 'If God has once been known, the world and self must thereafter be seen under the survey of this experience'" (pp. 32-33). This was the same Hocking who later chaired the Laymen's Inquiry into Foreign Missions, which precipitated Machen's efforts against modernism in missions that ultimately led to Machen's expulsion from the Presbyterian church.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 24.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 25-26.

A further criticism Van Til made of Idealism was that it led to a correlativity between God and humanity and thus denied the self-sufficiency of God. He defined this problem in the following way: "By correlativity between God and man we mean what Pringle-Pattison means when he says: 'Even granted that a divine experience is posited to correspond to objects not known by us, it implies in the case of any so called object, the identity or at least the complete resemblance of the divine and human mode of experience.'"⁵¹

Next Van Til turned to a discussion of the similarities and differences between Idealism and Theism in their notions of unity and difference. He noted that for both of them unity and difference were considered to be fundamental, but again it was for different reasons. He claimed that

only a unity based upon the complete timeless actuality of Theism can ever hope to offer any coherence in experience. But we hasten to add that such unity is beyond the possibility of our comprehension. In the Christian doctrine of the Trinity we find unity and difference equally fundamental, so that the unity is concrete and not abstract. It is on the analogy of this concrete unity in difference we may conceive all human experience to be built and to have its significance on that basis.⁵²

Of special importance once again was Van Til's sense of human limitation. While unity is fundamental and necessary, we cannot comprehend it, that is, fully understand or explain it. He considered such exhaustive comprehension to be the implicit, but impossible, goal of the Idealists. However, he rooted the basic difference between Idealists and Theists with respect to unity and difference in the fact that

the God of Theism is thought to be related to the world but freely related. No Idealist will subscribe to this: for him it has all the realistic implications of external relations. Idealism will at once reply that no relation can be free. But to say that is to rely on formal logic alone. It carries apriorism through to the death of our experience. We cannot do justice to time unless we grant the possibility of an absolute beginning of phenomenal existence; back of it lies either the void or a God completely actual. Such was our transcendental argument. To overthrow this by saying that all relations must be internal and necessary is to say that abstract logic can dictate for all possible experience, divine as well as human. Abstract logic cannot prove the existence of an Absolute, for its absolute must be related, but neither can abstract logic prove the non-existence of an Absolute.⁵³

Once again, in Van Til's view, Idealism had erred by its a prioristic formal logic, which led to a conception of Reality as being qualitatively all of one piece, or monistic.

⁵¹ Ibid 26 This rejection of correlativity clearly foreshadowed Van Til's later emphasis on the Creator-creature distinction

⁵² Ibid 28-29 Again, this point was later developed by Van Til in his teaching that the doctrine of the Trinity provides the solution to the One and Many problem Rousas J Rushdoony championed this notion in his book, *The One and the Many Studies in the Philosophy of Order and Ultimacy* (Fairfax, VA Thoburn, 1978) Rushdoony's interest in Van Til extends back to the beginning of his career, as his first book was *By What Standard? An Analysis of the Philosophy of Cornelius Van Til* (Philadelphia Presbyterian and Reformed, 1959)

⁵³ Ibid 29-30

A further apparent similarity but real difference between Idealism and Theism that Van Til mentioned is the concept of mystery. Both appealed to "mystery" with respect to insoluble problems in their systems,⁵⁴ but their concepts of mystery differed. For the Theist, the self-conscious rationality of God lay behind the mystery; for the Idealist, mystery meant either bare possibility behind all reality or merely the not-yet-known. In either case, the mystery would hold for God as well as for the human mind.⁵⁵

Van Til surveyed numerous Idealist writers with respect to their increasing emphasis on the reality of time, with the result that the Absolute was "losing out." In the growing number of restrictions and concessions being made by Idealists, he saw an increasing convergence between Idealism and Pragmatism. He wrote, "Now it is this emphasis on time and succession as an inseparable aspect of the whole of reality that leads Idealism very close to Pragmatism. The distinction made by Theism between an Absolute and timeless reality creating the universe which is in time Idealism is unable to accept because of the incomprehensibility of a relation between the two."⁵⁶ Many Idealists were moving away from the notion of Reality being changeless, and thus in a basic sense from Idealism. Van Til further noted, "The only complete alternative to temporal creation,—since all agree that time is however abstract or low or subjective an aspect, still an inseparable aspect of some types of experience,—is the absolute origination of the whole or the eternity of a process. It seems impossible for Idealism to accept either of these if it still wishes to remain distinct from Pragmatism."⁵⁷ Van Til saw three basic alternatives for explaining the reality of the experience of time: temporal creation, absolute origination of the whole (emergence from the void), or the infinite regress of an eternal process. He argued that the latter two fit better with Pragmatism, yet only Theism supported the first option. In his view, absolute origination and eternal process both implied that possibility is prior to actuality, contrary to Idealist assumptions. Thus Idealism simply had no adequate way to deal with the reality of time and change.

Van Til concluded that Theism combines the strengths of Pragmatism and Idealism while avoiding their most serious pitfalls. He stated,

⁵⁴ One notable example of this was F. H. Bradley in his work *Appearance and Reality*.

⁵⁵ "We had accepted the validity of human knowledge not because of its great scope but because of its firm basis, because the Absolute without whom we could have no knowledge at all is the guarantee of that knowledge which we have. We do not hold as the modern realist, that you can patch its replica to a fragment of reality and say that you have truth; coherence must be the basis of correspondence. But the coherence itself is a matter of faith: that is, complete coherence can lie in the Absolute alone. Having taken away, as noted above, the essential distinction between God and man Idealism has no escape from holding 'the real as rational' to be an ideal attainable by man or otherwise appeal to a mystery beyond rationality. When the theist says he does not know or as we say appeals to mystery he visualizes back of that mystery the self-conscious rationality of God; when the Idealist appeals to mystery it is into the abyss of the barely possible he looks since the mystery holds for God as well as man. Or otherwise expressed the Idealist has no right to appeal to mystery except in the sense of the not yet known, if he would cling to his motto that the real is rational" (Van Til, "God and the Absolute" 37–38).

⁵⁶ Ibid. 61–62.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 63.

If then the rationality and coherence of human experience needs an Absolute as the Idealist has always maintained against Pragmatism because absolute origination of the whole of reality and infinite regress are unacceptable, the Absolute of Christian Theism would appear philosophically the most tenable since it involves as a conception no greater logical difficulties than the Absolute of Idealism while it does not do violence to our experience of time. Idealism has emphasized the fact that rationality is a genuine element of our experience too much ignored by Pragmatism; the latter in turn has emphasized the reality of change and time: Theism has sought to do justice to both of these elements in the notion of its God as Absolute with its concomitant of temporal creation.⁵⁸

Several things can be noted from the study of Van Til's dissertation. First, he was clearly impressed by the Idealists and considered their position to be far sounder than that of the Pragmatists. He mentioned numerous times the similarities between Idealism and Theism, although generally prefaced by the adjective "formal." However, he also argued at length against some of the typical Idealist problematics, especially the unreality of time, the aprioristic application of logic, and the pantheistic notion of the Absolute as a whole including both whatever god there might be and humanity. A careful reading of his dissertation would have disabused some of his critics of their misconceptions about his position. It is also impressive how many of the themes of his later apologetical system appeared in some form within the dissertation.

2. *Christianity and Idealism.* While it might have been considered unreasonable to expect his critics to find a way to read an unpublished dissertation in order to find the basis of his views, in point of fact Van Til revised his dissertation (which itself was only sixty-five pages long) for publication in the *Evangelical Quarterly* in 1930.⁵⁹ In 1955, as part of his effort to answer his critics, he published a collection entitled *Christianity and Idealism*, in which the first article was this revision of "God and the Absolute."⁶⁰ While the revised version is better organized than the original, it eliminated some significant aspects of the dissertation. For example, many of the clear statements regarding the transcendental argument were left out, although reference was still made to presuppositions. He did clarify somewhat his treatment of Bradley, Bosanquet, and Pringle-Pattison. In spite of the major revisions in the presentation, the basic argument remained that Idealism,

⁵⁸ Ibid. 65. This is the conclusion to the dissertation.

⁵⁹ Cornelius Van Til, "God and the Absolute," *EvQ* 2 (1930) 358-88. This is a British publication and hence may not have been widely available for his American readers.

⁶⁰ Cornelius Van Til, *Christianity and Idealism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955). In the preface he wrote, "From time to time I have written on the relation of idealist philosophy to Christianity. It is obvious that such philosophies as materialism and pragmatism are foes of Christianity. It is less obvious but no less true that Idealism and Christianity are mutually exclusive. Christianity teaches man to worship and serve God the Creator. Idealism, no less than materialism or pragmatism, teaches man to serve and worship the creature. Idealism has a language which resembles that of Christianity but its thought content leads inevitably towards pragmatism. That is the idea expressed in the articles that are herewith reproduced" (p. 3).

although it had formal similarities to Theism, was at root opposed to Theism, just as Pragmatism was.

The next article in this collection was a survey of "Recent American Philosophy," which had been published originally in the Dutch journal *Philosophia Reformata*.⁶¹ This article included both a summary of Anglo-American idealism and reactions against it. Following that came an article on "The Theism of A. E. Taylor."⁶² He began this article by writing,

A number of recent British philosophers have made a particularly attractive offer of peace and co-operation to orthodox believers. We refer to such men as A. Seth Pringle-Pattison, James Ward, Hastings Rashdall, and Clement C. J. Webb. These men have reacted against what they regarded as a Spinozistic interpretation of Hegel given by F. H. Bradley, Bernard Bosanquet, and others. The theism that these men offer to us seems to resemble the theism taught in Scripture so much that one may easily be led to identify them. Perhaps the most comprehensive presentation of this type of theism has been given by A. E. Taylor.⁶³

However, Van Til's conclusion was that Taylor had failed in his efforts because of his prior commitment to the idealistic theory of judgment. In his view, Taylor's basic problem was an erroneous philosophy of fact, which allowed for "brute facts," and thus for an "eternal dualism between the universals and particulars of our thinking." As such, he would be unable to reach a "concrete universal" which would provide a genuine unity between universals and particulars. According to Van Til, "Such a concrete universal cannot be reached; it must be presupposed."⁶⁴

Six of the seven remaining articles were book reviews of various Idealist authors. The two most notable reviews were of books written by Archibald Allen Bowman, Van Til's former professor at Princeton University. Both books were posthumous publications, *Studies in the Philosophy of Religion*, and *A Sacramental Universe: Being a Study in the Metaphysics of Experience*. Van Til's conclusion to the first review gave a good summary of his approach, an appreciative disagreement:

It is difficult to accord too high a tribute to the book of Bowman as a piece of philosophical writing. We are very appreciative of the high conception of religion he sets forth and defends. Yet the highest conception of religion, as long as it does not presuppose the existence of God as Creator and Sustainer of the universe to whom, now that man has sinned, no one can come except by grace,

⁶¹ Cornelius Van Til, "Recent American Philosophy," *Philosophia Reformata* 2 (1937) 1-24. This was the only article that Van Til published in this journal, although he was listed as a co-editor with Herman Dooyeweerd and D. Th. Vollenhoven from the founding of the journal until his retirement in 1976. The later divergence between Van Til and the Amsterdam philosophers was underscored by the fact that the journal took no notice of his passing away in 1987! This was in sharp contrast to the memorial issues dedicated to Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven. This would also indicate that his co-editorship was a token position, to add an American name to an otherwise Dutch journal.

⁶² Cornelius Van Til, "The Theism of A. E. Taylor," *WTJ* 1 (1939) 89-109.

⁶³ Van Til, *Christianity and Idealism* 57.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 74.

falls short of the glory of God and must in the last analysis be classed with the naturalisms of which it has given such valuable criticism.⁶⁵

The final article in *Christianity and Idealism* was entitled "Kant or Christ?"⁶⁶ This brief article gave a clear summary of one of Van Til's enduring themes, that of the negative influence of Kant on modern thought and theology. He wrote, "Modern theology is, generally speaking, opposed to metaphysics. It has been informed by the critical philosophy of Immanuel Kant."⁶⁷ In a few short pages Van Til referred to Sir Arthur Eddington, John Dewey, Albert Einstein, Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Karl Barth. Van Til concluded,

Reason, which on Kantian basis [*sic*] has presumed to legislate for the whole of reality, needs chance for its existence. If reality were God-structured the human mind could not be ultimately legislative. The idea of brute irrationality is presupposed in modern methodology. At the same time it is this brute irrationality which undermines every interpretative endeavor on the part of the would-be autonomous man. There is on the modern basis no possibility of the identification of any fact let alone the possibility of finding an intelligent relationship of one fact to another fact. The possibility of science and philosophy as well as the possibility of theology presupposes the idea of a God whose counsel determines "whatsoever comes to pass."⁶⁸

This quote clearly shows Van Til's emphasis on presuppositions, as well as on epistemology. The conclusion of his transcendental argument is present without being named or explicitly developed.

3. *Van Til and Kant.* Van Til's explicit opposition to Kant extended throughout his career. In fact, he often used Kant in a way somewhat analogous to his use of Calvin—only negatively, as an exemplar of the apostate mind. In 1925 Van Til wrote his Th.M. thesis on "Reformed Epistemology."⁶⁹ In that work he devoted several pages to a critique of Kant's

⁶⁵ Ibid. 99.

⁶⁶ Cornelius Van Til, "Kant or Christ?" *The Calvin Forum* 7 (February 1942) 133–35. This article was published a decade before Van Til himself became a major focus within the pages of this journal. In 1942 he had not yet become a controversial figure within the Christian Reformed Church and by that time had published numerous articles in *The Banner*, the denominational magazine.

⁶⁷ Van Til, *Christianity and Idealism* 133.

⁶⁸ Ibid. 139.

⁶⁹ Cornelius Van Til, "Reformed Epistemology" (Th.M. thesis, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1925). The handwritten original is located in the archives in the library at Westminster Theological Seminary. Van Til wrote it under the direction of Caspar Wistar Hodge, Jr., whose own doctoral dissertation was entitled "The Kantian Epistemology and Theism."

Van Til's earliest extant interaction with Kant is a student paper from his work at Princeton University simply entitled "Kant" and consisting of four parts totaling thirty-four pages. This work consisted basically of summarizing Kant's argument from the *Critique of Pure Reason*, particularly with reference to Norman Kemp Smith's commentary on that work. (This paper predated Smith's well-known translation of the *Critique*. Van Til himself quoted the German original at numerous points in the paper.) Thus the paper largely lacked Van Til's later negative critical comments. One of the strongest criticisms in the paper was given by way of quoting Kemp Smith

epistemology. He saw Kant's epistemology as not being critical enough! He wrote,

We may here call attention to *the fundamental error of all non-revelational idealistic epistemology*, that it needlessly shuts us up into subjectivity. It has made a great contribution to epistemology through its emphasis on the fact that our subject must be the starting point of all experience, but it has failed to analyze what that must mean. Kant's *Criticism* was here too naïve. Would that non-revelational thinking were more critical! It here assumes that all reality must be essentially of one nature if we are to have knowledge of it. All true idealism must assume a unity between all of reality but reality need not be of one kind for such a unity to be effected. That our starting point must be the human subject does not imply that it must be exclusively creative and productive. All it need mean, *and all it can mean* for a true idealism, is that experience must be brought into contact with it to be real for us. But this leaves ample room for receptivity. It leaves open⁷⁰ *the possibility* that reality need not be essentially one and all of experience a mental production, but that there may be reality totally beyond the forms of human experience, of which genuine knowledge is still possible through the initiative, not of the human, but of that higher form of reality. This ought to appeal to all idealists who boast of interpreting reality in the highest possible categories. Neither Kantian nor even Hegelian idealism can ever be truly idealistic. It must always interpret the higher in terms of the lower which is, for any sort of idealism, an unpardonable sin.⁷¹

Van Til was clearly arguing for the need of revelation in order for the human mind to be able to interpret the lower aspects of reality in terms of the higher, which was a constant refrain of Bosanquet and other idealists. Yet for them, the highest allowable knowledge was that of the human subject, and thus God (or the Absolute) had to be interpreted in terms of the human, which was admittedly lower! Yet the only way to get a knowledge of the "what" of God as well as the "that" was through revelation; thus Kant's exclusion of

approvingly: "In formulating this doctrine of the a priori as yielding objective insight and yet limited in the sphere of its application, the *Critique of Pure Reason* marks an epoch in the history of skepticism, no less than in the development of Idealist teaching" (p. 17). Van Til continued to emphasize that Kantian epistemology would ultimately lead to skepticism throughout his career, and such an analysis also underlay his repeated assertions that all non-Christian thought is, at root, irrational.

The interpretation of Kant's epistemology as leading to skepticism, which Van Til adopted, has been common in the history of the interpretation of Kant. For example, see Henry E. Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism: An Interpretation and Defense* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983) 5–6, where he documents and then argues against such a view.

⁷⁰ A marginal note in the original handwritten thesis at this point reads "bad"; it was presumably made by Van Til when he later re-read his Th.M. thesis in 1969 (this date is from a note placed inside the thesis in the Westminster Theological Seminary archives). Later in his career Van Til would argue strenuously against a monistic view that reduced God to a mere aspect of Reality and clearly taught a "two-level" theory of reality, namely, God and creation. However, he also stressed that "[f]or us God's being is ultimate, while created being is, in the nature of the case, derivative." See Van Til, *Defense of the Faith* 29.

⁷¹ Van Til, "Reformed Epistemology" 34–35. The emphases are those of the author.

theoretical knowledge of the noumenal realm was due to the assumption of human autonomy, just as the establishment of the moral law independent of God expressed autonomy in practical reason.⁷² In both cases, Van Til believed, Kant could not avoid falling into a subjectivism that, at root, expressed a rebellion against God. For example, Van Til wrote,

What then was the answer? How was science to be saved? And how was freedom, and with it morality, to be saved? Kant discovered the answer to both questions at once. In fact the two questions involve one another and require a single answer. The answer for Kant lies in the idea of the utter self-sufficiency or freedom of human personality. Science is to be saved by assuming that man's free theoretical thought is the source of the order found in it. Morality is to be saved by assuming that man's free moral personality is virtually the source of the moral law. And by making the ultimately free or autonomous human personality the source of both the order of nature and of morality, both were to be united in one whole. It is thus that Kant hopes to attain what none of the rationalists or determinists had ever been able to attain, namely, the subsumption of all reality, temporal and eternal, under one principle of unification. He obtained indirectly that which dogmatic thinking had sought to obtain directly. He found a principle of unification that over-arched both God the creator and man the creature. He assumed that this formal all-inclusive principle of unity was a presupposition, or precondition of the possibility of any experience.⁷³

Van Til continued this basic critique of Kant throughout his career, as can be seen in writings ranging from student syllabi such as *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* and *Christian Theistic Ethics* to books written late in his career such as *The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought* and *Who Do You Say That I Am?*⁷⁴ Van Til also saw Kantian epistemology and ethics as either directly or indirectly influencing modern thought in general, and especially modern theology, since that time. Thus in dealing with Kant, he

⁷² For Van Til, the term "autonomy" expressed the root sin of declaration of independence from God, and thus in contrast to submission to God's revelation in the Scriptures. Obviously Kant did not use the term in that sense, yet, for Van Til, Kant's use of it indicated precisely such an underlying attitude.

⁷³ Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Theistic Ethics*, Volume III: *In Defense of the Faith/Biblical Christianity* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974) 245. The first section is the publication of a student syllabus of that name which was originally written in 1940 and reprinted in 1952 and 1964. The second section, which includes the discussion on Kant, originally appeared as a student syllabus entitled "Modern Ethical Theories," written in 1963.

⁷⁴ See Cornelius Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, Volume II: *In Defense of the Faith/Biblical Christianity* (Ripon, CA: den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1969). This was the largely unchanged publication of Van Til's 1932 student syllabus then entitled "The Metaphysics of Apologetics," which included a thorough revision of his Th.M. thesis, "Reformed Apologetics." The last chapter of *Christian Theistic Ethics* is an extended discussion of Kant's philosophy, especially, but not exclusively, with respect to the *Critique of Practical Reason*, and referring as well to the interpretations of Norman Kemp Smith, Edward Caird, and Richard Kroner. In *The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971) 106-31, Van Til gave a lengthy critique of Kant's *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*. Finally, see the discussion on Kant in *Who Do You Say That I Am?* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1975) 80-86.

considered himself to be dealing fundamentally with the root cause of contemporary theological and philosophical problems. In this sense he agreed with Kant's own estimate of his philosophy, that it represented a "Copernican revolution" in the history of philosophy. As a result, Van Til interacted with all three of Kant's critiques, as well as his *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, and also referred to several contemporary interpreters of Kant.⁷⁵

The influence of Kant on Van Til can be seen in two ways. First, there is the focusing of attention on epistemological problems, which became common in philosophy after Kant. In that sense, Van Til was himself a post-Kantian thinker.⁷⁶ However, the more profound influence can be seen in Van Til's adoption of a transcendental argument for his apologetics.⁷⁷ Kant had sought in the first critique to find what conditions must be presupposed in order for us to have experience and knowledge of that experience. He first assumed that we do have such knowledge, but then the question was how such knowledge is possible. The answer, as he worked through his transcendental deductions, was space and time and the categories, not as properties of "things-in-themselves," but as the *a priori* forms of all our intuitions. This, of course, involved his controversial notion of "things-in-themselves,"

⁷⁵ Van Til's concentration on Kant led one critic to complain that he interpreted the twentieth century in terms of eighteenth-century philosophy. See William Paul, "The Methodology of Christian Evidences II" 224. Obviously Paul failed to consider Van Til's extensive writings on the idealist philosophers.

⁷⁶ For example, Van Til wrote, "For the knower himself needs interpretation as well as the things he knows. The human mind as the knowing subject, makes its contribution to the knowledge it obtains" (*Defense of the Faith* 84).

⁷⁷ Barry Stroud, in "Transcendental Arguments," *The Journal of Philosophy* 65/9 (1968) 241-56, argued that a transcendental argument was employed by Kant to answer the "question of right" regarding concepts—how are we justified in employing concepts in our experience? He wrote, "Doubts about whether some particular hypothesis is true can often be settled by following the ordinary ways of establishing matters of so-called empirical fact. But the skeptic maintains that the whole structure of practices and beliefs on the basis of which empirical hypotheses are ordinarily 'supported' has not itself been shown to be reliable. As long as we have a public objective world of material objects in space and time to rely on, particular questions about how we know that such-and-such is the case can eventually be settled. But that there is such a world of material objects at all is a matter of contingent fact, and the skeptic challenges us to show how we know it. According to him, any justification for our belief will have to come from within experience, and so no adequate justification can ever be given. Transcendental arguments are supposed to demonstrate the impossibility or illegitimacy of this skeptical challenge by proving that certain concepts are necessary for thought or experience . . ." (p. 242). He later specifically applied this to Kant, stating, "Kant thought that his transcendental proofs counted in a unique way against both skepticism and conventionalism [empiricism] because their conclusions were synthetic and could be known *a priori*. They are shown to have this status by a transcendental argument which proves that the truth of its conclusion is a necessary condition of there being any experience or thought at all. If the conclusion were not true, there could be no experience to falsify it. For Kant, proofs that such-and-such is a necessary condition of thought or experience in general, therefore, have a special feature which is not shared by other proofs that one thing is a necessary condition of another, and because they have this feature they can answer the 'question of justification'" (p. 252). However, in Stroud's opinion, the so-called transcendental argument amounted to making use in some way of the verification principle, and hence came close to the logical positivism of the Vienna circle!

with the concomitant phenomenal/noumenal distinction. For Van Til, Kant's fundamental error was excluding God from the outset and not making God the basic presupposition of predication. As Van Til employed the transcendental argument, the eternal triune God revealed by Scripture must be presupposed in order for experience to have any intelligibility.⁷⁸ This approach resembled the argument of the Idealists for the Absolute, so he made an effort to distinguish his position from theirs.⁷⁹

IV. VAN TIL'S USE OF IDEALISM

Given this complex interaction of Van Til with Kantian and idealist philosophy, it would be useful at this point to go back and look at some of the passages in his writings that gave rise to the criticisms mentioned in the first part of this chapter, as well as to look at the further developments he made in defending his teachings. Buswell, the earliest of Van Til's critics with respect to idealism, pointed to such concepts in Van Til as the One and the Many, the concrete universal, and the limiting concept as being evidence of Hegelian influence.

Early in *Common Grace* Van Til made the statement, "In any philosophy of history men seek to systematize the 'facts' of history. The many 'facts' of

⁷⁸ Van Til's use of the transcendental argument is generally recognized by his supporters (see footnote 40 above). However, it has also engendered some debate. In the posthumously published *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1998) 496-515, the late Greg Bahnsen argued that the transcendental argument is the key to understanding and using Van Til's apologetics. He clearly stated that Van Til had undertaken Kant's program of seeking the preconditions of the possibility of human intelligibility, while rejecting Kant's solution. Thus he agreed with Van Til (and Kant) that a transcendental argument differs significantly from inductive or deductive arguments, and he saw Van Til as applying the method of Kant and idealism in a way which they could not because of their anti-Christian assumptions. Bahnsen himself was very effective in making use of this approach in debates with atheists, who were prepared to handle the traditional arguments but not to justify their own right to claim knowledge.

On the other hand, John Frame, in the chapter "Reasoning by Presupposition" in *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1995) 311-22, argues that while the transcendental argument is a very powerful argument, it is also very complex and not suitable for every apologetical situation. He states that "Van Til phrases his conclusion in a way that makes it look far simpler than it is. One gets the impression that all the arduous labors of past apologists, proving this or that, can now be bypassed. Now, it seems, we only have to prove one thing, that universal intelligibility presupposes God. But that one thing is so complex that it, in turn, presupposes all the other things. Van Til seemed to give the impression, although doubtless he knew better, that he had found a 'magic bullet,' a simple, straightforward argument that would destroy all unbelief in one fell swoop" (pp. 316-17). Frame admits that Bahnsen sticks closer to Van Til in his approach of relying on the indirect approach, that of proving Christianity by demonstrating the "impossibility of the contrary," and that he had been successful in doing so. However, Frame argues that such an approach is not necessary in order to have a transcendental conclusion. He expresses doubt whether the transcendental argument is as distinct from the more traditional inductive and deductive forms as Van Til assumed.

⁷⁹ Chapters 11 through 13 of Van Til's *Survey of Christian Epistemology* (pp. 132-82) contrast various philosophers (mostly idealists) to his position, beginning with more extreme anti-theists (e.g. Bradley) and ending with those who claimed, but failed, in his view, to support Christianity with their philosophy (e.g. Taylor). See also the discussion above of Van Til's dissertation, "God and the Absolute."

history are to be brought into one pattern. Or, if we wish, we may say that the many 'facts' of history are to be regarded *in the light of* one pattern. The philosophy of history is, accordingly, an aspect of the perplexing *One and Many* problem."⁸⁰ He went on to state that the philosophy of history is further complicated by the fact that it deals with the aspect of change in Reality. Thus he discussed opposing views of the philosophy of fact and the philosophy of law, that is, differing views on the principles of individuation and unity. His argument was that a consistent Christian position accepts the counsel of God as the basic principle of individuation and unity. Thus the Christian philosophy of history was to be found by interpreting all of the facts of history in the light of the pattern which is given in Scripture. The many facts of history find their unity in the one eternal plan of God.⁸¹ The believer accepts, even when unable to explain fully, the pattern given in Scripture.

It is in the context of this discussion of his philosophy of history that Van Til made a statement to which Buswell and others object. It occurred in the conclusion to this section, where he wrote,

The significance of our discussion on fact, law and reason for the construction of a Christian philosophy of history may now be pointed out explicitly. The philosophy of history inquires into the meaning of history. To use a phrase of Kierkegaard, we ask how the Moment *is to have significance*. Our claim as believers is that the Moment cannot intelligently be shown to have any significance except upon the presupposition of the biblical doctrine of the ontological trinity. In the ontological trinity there is complete harmony between an equally ultimate one and many. The persons of the trinity are mutually exhaustive of one another and of God's nature. It is the absolute equality in point of ultimacy that requires all the emphasis we can give it. Involved in this absolute equality is complete interdependence; God is our concrete universal.⁸²

This is the point at which Van Til made possibly his most daring doctrinal innovation, in relating both the "One and Many" and "concrete universal" terms to the doctrine of the Trinity. Van Til used the term "ontological trinity" to refer to the triune God with respect to God's self-sufficient existence apart from any relationship to creation, and therefore restricted any human knowledge of such to what is revealed in Scripture.⁸³ His point with the first term, the "One and Many," as well as his justification for using it, seemed to be that God cannot be ultimately reduced, numerically speaking, to either one

⁸⁰ Van Til, *Common Grace* 2.

⁸¹ There is nothing unique about Van Til's notion of history being the outworking of God's plan. Such was commonplace in medieval and Reformation historians. His contribution, if one may call it that, is to make use of the "One and Many" term as part of his exposition of the view. See Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, & Modern* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), especially chapters 7 through 11, for a survey of various Christian approaches to history. Van Til recognized that his view would be considered "unscientific" by modern historiographers, but argued that the underlying disagreement was on the level of the philosophy of fact and law.

⁸² Van Til, *Common Grace* 7-8. Emphasis is the author's.

⁸³ Van Til, as did Calvin and the intervening Reformed orthodoxy, accepted the trinitarian and Christological doctrines as expressed in the early Church creeds, e.g. the Councils of Nicea, Constantinople I, and Chalcedon.

or three. To do either one would be to fall into one of the trinitarian heresies. Thus, both the "oneness" and "threeness" of God must be taken as equally ultimate; which is to say, that in the being of God, the One and the Many are both equally ultimate. Van Til stressed this fact of equal ultimacy as having great philosophical consequences, but also as having been available only on the basis of revelation.

Along with this emphasis on "equal ultimacy" came Van Til's application of the notorious idealist term "concrete universal" to God. In this original context he failed to explain much about what exactly he meant; it seems in some way to have been a "throwaway" line. However, he used the term again later in *Common Grace*, when he wrote,

What has been said by way of criticism on the remnants of abstract thinking found in Kuyper, Bavinck, and Hepp has virtually suggested the direction of thought we would follow in approaching the question of common grace. The ontological trinity will be our interpretative concept everywhere. God is our concrete universal; in Him thought and being are conterminous, in Him the problem of knowledge is solved. If we begin thus with the ontological trinity as our concrete universal, we frankly differ from every school of philosophy and from every school of science not merely in our conclusion, but in our starting-point and in our method as well. For us, the facts are what they are, and the universals are what they are, because of their common dependence upon the ontological trinity. Thus, as earlier discussed, the facts are correlative to the universals. Because of this correlativity there is genuine progress in history; because of it the Moment has significance.⁸⁴

Here Van Til again used the term "concrete universal" with reference to God, twice in rapid succession, and without any word of explanation. He seemed to have assumed that his reader would understand what he meant, but in doing so left himself vulnerable to misunderstanding by his critics such as Buswell.⁸⁵

The next "red flag" that Van Til raised in *Common Grace* was his promotion of what he referred to as a Christian notion of a "limiting concept." He contrasted this to what he referred to as the non-Christian notion of the limiting concept. He introduced this by saying,

If we hold to a theology of the apparently paradoxical we must also hold, by consequence, to the Christian notion of a *limiting concept*. The non-Christian notion of the limiting concept has been developed on the basis of the non-Christian conception of mystery. By contrast we may think of the Christian notion of the limiting concept as based upon the Christian conception of mystery. The non-Christian notion of the limiting concept is the product of would-be autonomous man who seeks to legislate for all reality, but bows before the irrational as that which he has not yet rationalized. The Christian notion of the limiting concept is the product of the creature who seeks to set forth in systematic form something of the revelation of the Creator.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Ibid. 54.

⁸⁵ Van Til's explanation of the term "concrete universal" will be given in context below.

⁸⁶ Ibid. 11. In his critique of Kuyper's treatment of universals and particulars, Van Til wrote, "If this position were carried through, our 'systems' of interpretation would be 'approximations' in the Platonic, rather than in the Christian sense of the word, our limiting concepts would be

Van Til referred to the formulation of the early Church creeds as exemplifying the use of a Christian notion of a limiting concept. The Church did not claim to have exhausted the fullness of God's revelation in the creeds, but to have given the best approximation they could of the fullness of the truth of God. In this way Van Til tied in his notion of the limiting concept to his view of the incomprehensibility of God. In his view, the non-Christian notion of the limiting concept rested on an ultimate skepticism regarding the knowledge of a universally valid truth. By way of contrast, the Christian can know truly, without having to know fully, by means of God's revelation. The limitation which Van Til expressed by the notion of a limiting concept is that of partial, creaturely knowledge, not the assumption of an unprovable postulate.⁸⁷ Thus, human responsibility and divine sovereignty are limited by each other, not in the sense of denying the full import of the other, but in the sense that one cannot be taken as denying the other, even though the relationship cannot be humanly explained. Thus there is an apparent contradiction, which is only resolved in the counsel of God.⁸⁸

A further point of possible contention occurred when Van Til referred to God as the Absolute. He wrote, "The rules of formal logic must be followed in all our attempts at systematic exposition of God's revelation, whether general or special. But the syllogistic process must be followed in frank subordination to the notion of a self-sufficient God. We must here truly face the Absolute. We must think His thoughts after Him. We must think analogically, rather than univocally."⁸⁹ Van Til actually seldom referred to God as the Absolute, perhaps because he was mindful of his own arguments in his dissertation. His point was, however, that only in the self-sufficient God revealed in Scripture does one meet the One who is truly Absolute.

Van Til was keenly aware of the controversy which his writings had generated, and as a result responded by publishing two items in 1955, *Christianity and Idealism* (already discussed) and *The Defense of the Faith*. The latter was the first full exposition of his apologetical system that was made available to the general public, although his mimeographed syllabus "Christian Apologetics" had been circulating in various editions for some time.⁹⁰

Kantian rather than Calvinistic, and our 'as if' patterned after the *Critique of Pure Reason* rather than after the *Institutes*" (p. 36). This passage points to the origination of a Christian notion of the limiting concept in Van Til's study of Kant more specifically than in his study of idealism (although he considered idealism to be the outworking of Kant's philosophy in one direction). Regardless of its specific parentage, Van Til's critics considered it as evidence of corruption by philosophy.

⁸⁷ Another application he made was to use "abstract universals," such as creatureliness, only as "limiting concepts." See *Common Grace* 26-27, 73.

⁸⁸ Note in the above quote the connection of the limiting concept to apparent contradiction or paradox.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* 28.

⁹⁰ This syllabus itself would be eventually published as *Christian Apologetics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976). Eric Bristley's exhaustive bibliography of Van Til, *A Guide to the Writings of Cornelius Van Til, 1895-1987* (Chicago: Olive Tree Communications, 1995), lists twelve printings of a syllabus under the title "Apologetics" or "Christian Apologetics," from 1929 through 1975, and ranging in length from 62 to 113 pages. All editions from 1953 on were 99 pages, as was the published book form.

He incorporated most of the material from the syllabus into *The Defense of the Faith*, but greatly expanded it in order to answer his critics. The first edition in particular took note of his critics and attempted to answer them, although much of this material was edited out for the second and third editions.⁹¹ In the introduction to the first edition he gave a summary of the errors of which various authors had accused him and then wrote, "The reader may be struck by two things. First, there is the extreme seriousness of these charges. I am accused of borrowing my epistemology from idealism and presenting a compound of Hegelian rationalism and modern existentialism. Idealism and existentialism do not take the Scriptures to be the Word of God; they do not believe in the God of the Bible."⁹² Van Til's reader would also be struck by the fact that he took these charges seriously, although he noted that some of criticisms leveled against him seemed to cancel out each other.⁹³ His own contention was that his thought was "informed by simple generic Calvinism rather than by idealism, Hegelian rationalism, existentialism, and/or phenomenism."⁹⁴

In the chapter "The Christian Philosophy of Reality" Van Til gave a general defense of the use of philosophical terms, and then gave a more thorough explanation of what he meant by using the terms "One and Many" and "concrete universal." He stated that he was attempting to "answer the One and Many question from the Christian point of view."⁹⁵ Thus he repeated the point made earlier in *Common Grace*, saying, "Using the language of the One-and-Many question we contend that in God the one and the many are equally ultimate."⁹⁶ He also stated that there is a need, not seen in non-Christian philosophy, of distinguishing between the Eternal One-and-Many, and the temporal one-and-many. The latter is created by God, and both particulars or facts and universals or laws are derived from and dependent upon him.

At this point Van Til finally gave an explanation of his use of the term "concrete universal." He stated that philosophers had been vexed by the problem of bringing the many into contact with each other. Generalizing or abstracting universals from particulars eventually ended up in denying their particularity. The idealists had conceived of the notion of a concrete universal

⁹¹ The second and third editions (which are identical except for some minor corrections and the addition of a few footnotes) had a completely rewritten introduction from the first edition (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955), and left out the chapters on "Theological Problems" (which had explicit replies to Daane, J. DeBoer, and Orlebeke), "Christian Epistemology," and "Common Grace and Existentialism."

⁹² Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 1st ed. 6-7.

⁹³ "On the one hand, I am said to be more sure of idealist logic than of Christianity, and on the other hand I am said to hold that Christians and non-Christians do not even think according to the same laws of thought!" (ibid. 9). Obviously, these criticisms came from different writers reacting to different aspects of his writing, although most of the critics were responding to the same work, *Common Grace*.

⁹⁴ Ibid. 20. Obviously Van Til could not deny that he had studied and written on idealism. Here he seemed to use "informed" in a very strong sense, e.g. "controlled."

⁹⁵ Ibid. 42.

⁹⁶ Ibid. At this point Van Til linked his notion of equal ultimacy to opposition to subordinationism, which had been taught by "all heresies in the history of the church."

in order to escape the problematics of abstract or unconnected particulars and abstract universals. Van Til denied that they had been successful in their endeavor by stating, "It is only in the Christian doctrine of the triune God, as we are bound to believe, that we really have a *concrete universal*."⁹⁷ In God's being there are no particulars not related to the universal and there is nothing universal that is not fully expressed in the particulars."⁹⁸ A concrete universal is one which includes all its particulars, and which also is fully expressed in them. At the same time, the term itself would seem to imply that it also has ontological status, i.e. exists, and is not a mere concept. Van Til argued that only the Christian doctrine of the triune God meets all the qualifications demanded by this notion that originated in idealist philosophy.

Further influence of, yet difference from, idealist philosophy can be seen in Van Til's treatment of God's knowledge. He wrote, "He [God] is omniscient because of what he is as a self-sufficient Being. On the other hand we must add that the nature of God's being requires complete exhaustive self-consciousness. *God's Being is coterminous with his self-consciousness*. This point it [*sic*] is of importance to emphasize."⁹⁹ He further explicated this by stating,

It should be noted that it is only if we hold to the coterminosity of the being and the consciousness of God that we can avoid pantheism. If knowledge and being are not identical in God, as pertaining to himself, he is made dependent upon something that exists beside himself. In that case the consciousness of God is made to depend upon temporal reality and then the being of God in turn is made dependent upon temporal reality.¹⁰⁰

The notion of the identity of the being and knowledge of God led to charges of pantheism, as Van Til well knew. The key qualifier here was "as pertaining to himself." His point was that God knows himself exhaustively. There is not some aspect of God's being which remains for God to discover. Van Til used the term "analytical" to describe God's self-knowledge. He stated,

Analytical knowledge, in distinction from synthetic knowledge, means knowledge that is not gained by reference to something that exists without the knower. God knows himself not by comparing and contrasting himself with anything, not even non-being, outside himself. He knows himself by one simple eternal act of vision. In God therefore the real is the rational and the rational is the real.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ At this point Van Til placed a footnote: "The reader may note that the meaning I attribute to the phrase 'concrete universal' is sharply contrasted with the meaning attributed to the same phrase by idealist philosophers" (*Defense of the Faith*, 1st ed., n. 43). Various idealist philosophers used the notion in different ways, but certainly an orthodox Christian theological application would not occur to them. However, even Van Til would have to admit his meaning had some connection with theirs, or there would be no point in using the term.

⁹⁸ Ibid. 43.

⁹⁹ Ibid. 35.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. 36.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. 37. This definition is not exactly how Kant used it. He stated, "Analytic judgments (affirmative) are therefore those in which the connection of the predicate with the subject is thought through identity; those in which this connection is thought without identity should be

Even more daring perhaps was Van Til's statement that God's knowledge of the universe was also analytical. However, he was aware of possible misunderstandings, and made it clear that he was not holding to some pantheistic view or idea of eternal creation. He wrote, "We conclude then that God's knowledge of the universe is also analytical. God's knowledge of the universe depends upon God's knowledge of himself. God has made the universe in accordance with his eternal plan for that universe."¹⁰² His point again was that God knows the world exhaustively by virtue of his eternal decree and thus cannot learn something "new" through experience. However, God's knowledge and our existence are not the same thing, as in some idealist philosophies. Van Til clearly taught a "two-level" reality, maintaining the Creator-creation distinction. He wrote, "God does, to be sure, behold the universe and the children of men as being 'outside' himself."¹⁰³ But the knowledge God has of "current events" is logically dependent upon his eternal decree. God learns nothing new as history unfolds.

A further indication of the influence of idealist philosophy may be found in the contrast which Van Til made between Christian and non-Christian epistemology. The latter seems to be much more applicable to the idealist philosophies than to other forms. He wrote,

When we say that as Christians we believe in an ultimate rationalism we are, naturally, not intending anything like the idea that we as human beings have or may at some time expect to have a comprehensive rational understanding of God. We have just asserted the contrary. Here too every non-Christian epistemology may be distinguished from Christian epistemology in that it is only Christian epistemology that does not set before itself the ideal of comprehensive

entitled synthetic. The former, as adding nothing through the predicate to the concept of the subject, but merely breaking it up into those constituent concepts that have all along been thought in it, although confusedly, can also be entitled explicative." Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (trans. Norman Kemp Smith; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965 [1929]) 49 [A7/B10-11]. Jesse DeBoer chided Van Til for his careless use of language, writing, "I have no objection to Van Til's saying that God's self-knowledge is 'analytic' in the sense that 'God does not need to look beyond himself for additions to his knowledge.' But it would be silly to pretend that the term 'analytic' as so used bears any resemblance to the strict use of Kant or of a contemporary logician; and if one did understand this term, whenever Van Til uses it, as a logician understands it, he might be wise to hesitate before applying it to God's self-knowledge" ("Professor Van Til's Apologetics, Part I: A Linguistic Bramble Patch," *The Calvin Forum* 19 [August-September 1953] 7). However, the connection with Kant is not as farfetched as it first seems. Kant went on to say, "Judgments of experience, as such, are one and all synthetic" (*Critique of Pure Reason* 50 [A7/B11]). This certainly was a major part of Van Til's point: God's self-knowledge does not depend upon some form of experience or interaction with that which is not God.

The allusion to Hegel in the last line of the quote is unmistakable—but with an all-important qualifying phrase, "in God." This expresses Van Til's underlying rationalism. He viewed God and, as a consequence, God's creation as fundamentally rational, but he always limited human capability in knowledge by his doctrine of incomprehensibility. Along the same lines he wrote that "God has and is complete internal coherence" (*Defense of the Faith* 54) and that "Christianity is, in the last analysis, not an absolute irrationalism but an absolute 'rationalism'" (p. 58).

¹⁰² Van Til, *Defense of the Faith* 56.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

knowledge for man. The reason for this is that it holds that comprehensive knowledge is found only in God. It is true that there must be comprehensive knowledge somewhere if there is to be any true knowledge anywhere but this comprehensive knowledge need not and cannot be in us; it must be in God.¹⁰⁴

This notion of comprehensive knowledge is an implication of the idealist coherence theory of truth. This was one of the problems that led Bradley to assert the notion of degrees of reality and truth.¹⁰⁵ The truth is in the whole, but the whole is the Absolute, not in appearances. Thus the idealist demand for coherence ended in a radical relativism. Bosanquet made an explicit appeal to comprehensiveness when he wrote,

Is it necessary to say a word about comprehensiveness? Sometimes we are told that our criterion is mere formal consistency. This can mean nothing but that the critic has not thought the matter out to the bitter end. By coherence or consistency we mean the consistency, so far as attainable, of the whole body of experience with itself. Nothing less would satisfy the law or individuality or the necessity of non-contradiction. But in this interpretation of consistency comprehensiveness is obviously included.¹⁰⁶

However, from this one cannot conclude that Van Til has a straightforward coherence view of truth. Rather, his view was that only God could have a comprehensive coherent system and that human knowledge must therefore correspond to God's knowledge through analogical thinking. In a certain sense, all human knowledge comes by revelation of God's knowledge, including general revelation of creation. This is another example in which Van Til attempted to answer a problem which was posed by, but in his view inadequately answered by, idealist philosophy.

V. CONCLUSION

Examples could be multiplied and repeated of Van Til's interaction with the idealists and of his adoption of terms and problems. Underlying this apologetical approach was his own personal conviction of the nature of apologetics. He opened his syllabus on "Christian Apologetics" with the statement, "Apologetics is the vindication of the Christian philosophy of life against the various forms of the non-Christian philosophy of life."¹⁰⁷ In his opening remarks he went on to say, "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.*"¹⁰⁸ Thus, for Van Til, apologetics was the aspect of

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. 58.

¹⁰⁵ See especially the chapters on "Degrees of Truth and Reality" and "The Absolute and Its Appearance" in F. H. Bradley, *Appearance and Reality*. See also his article, "On Truth and Coherence," *Mind* N.S. 18 (1909) 329-42.

¹⁰⁶ Bosanquet, *Logic* II.267.

¹⁰⁷ Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976) 1.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. 2.

defending the faith which focused on philosophical issues. When that approach was combined with his own philosophical training, a strong focus on philosophical issues, particularly epistemology and metaphysics, resulted. While he accepted in principle the legitimacy of the theistic proofs and the use of evidences, he also emphasized the need to do so in a proper manner, based solidly on Christian presuppositions. Since he himself did not give examples of such "proper use," his followers have disagreed over this issue.¹⁰⁹

Part of Van Til's interest in idealist philosophy can be traced to the fact that he recognized that parts of it appeared to be quite similar to Christian beliefs: for example, the above-mentioned connection of the Absolute with God, as well as the notion of an ultimate rationality, the emphasis on personality by many idealists, and a high regard for social ethics. Van Til even commented, "It is marvelous that out of such a soil the lofty ethics of idealism in all its form has sprung. It can only be the common grace of God that accounts for it."¹¹⁰ Yet he also clearly saw that idealism and Christianity were fundamentally incompatible, since the former denied the basic Creator-creature distinction and ultimately made God and the human correlative. He wrote, "And what is the issue between Christianity and idealism? It can be focussed [*sic*] in the concept of temporal creation which Christianity affirms and idealism denies. Idealists speak of a Reality which for them includes God and man."¹¹¹ Thus he finally concluded that "idealism is no friend of Christianity."¹¹²

While Van Til can be defended against the charges that his views were merely restatements of idealist philosophy, that philosophy did play a large role in setting his agenda. As has been shown, he accepted a number of the questions or problems that idealism had addressed and attempted to give an answer consistent with his Calvinist convictions. In so doing, he moved beyond some of the traditional problematics of apologetics to deal with new approaches. This can be seen in his emphasis on defending a total world-and-life view (which was also emphasized by the Dutch Reformed theologians) and the focus on epistemological issues. His use of idealist terminology can also be seen in this vein. Van Til himself wrote,

After we answer, in preliminary fashion, the question as to *what* we believe as Reformed Christians, we face the problem how to get people interested in our faith. Men in general do not use or even know our theological terms. But, to the extent that they are educated, they have had some training in secular philosophy. They have a non-Christian familiarity with the categories of God, man and the universe. If we are to speak to them and win them, it is necessary to

¹⁰⁹ For example, John Frame attempts to reformulate the traditional proofs and the use of historical evidence in a way consistent with presuppositionalism in his *Apologetics to the Glory of God: An Introduction* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1994), but his approach has been rejected by some other Van Tillians as falling back into evidentialism. For example, see the review of Frame's *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought*, by Richard L. Horner, in *New Horizons* 17/4 (April 1996) 24, which also refers to some of his earlier works.

¹¹⁰ Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 3d. ed., 64.

¹¹¹ Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 1st ed., 230.

¹¹² *Ibid.* 275.

learn their language. There is no possibility of avoiding this. We can make no contact with men unless we speak to them in their language.¹¹³

Van Til obviously saw his target audience, so to speak, as being those who were philosophically educated. However, those who wrote in response to his approach were those who were already within the Christian community, and especially within the Calvinist camp. Furthermore, among those who responded who had philosophical training, there was little sympathy or understanding of the idealist problematics. While this does not legitimize all of their criticisms, it does point out a fundamental limitation in this aspect of Van Til's apologetics. By tailoring so much of his analysis to idealist philosophy, he lost his voice when his audience in the general culture changed to other forms of philosophy.¹¹⁴ This was amply demonstrated by the distorted misreading given him by Jesse DeBoer, in spite of the latter's confessed agreement with Van Til "on many basic matters."¹¹⁵ For example, the problem of the "One and Many" may have historically been of great interest, and undoubtedly will be so again, but when that particular problem is eclipsed by other questions in philosophy, an apologetic tailored to it may appear dated or obscure.

Van Til may well have been aware of this problem. Usage of idealist terminology and writings on the idealist philosophers are largely restricted to the earlier part of his career. After 1955, when he published *The Defense of the Faith and Christianity and Idealism*, he was seldom criticized for being an idealist, which either indicates that his critics were satisfied with his answers or that they had given up on him. However, his critique of philosophy also shifted towards a more exclusive focus on Kant. His approach seemed to be to get to the root of modern philosophical problems by analyzing its origins (the "Copernican revolution") and underlying presuppositions rather than trying to deal with the continuing shifts and lack of any unified approach in twentieth-century philosophy.

On the other hand, Van Til did not tailor his answers to the critics of Christianity by adopting the vagaries of philosophical fashion, as many of his contemporary liberal opponents had done. His goal was to interpret his contemporary culture through a world-and-life view based on the teachings of Scripture and the Reformed creeds rather than re-interpret the Scripture and creeds by the "latest findings of science." In this way, although he occasionally used a strange vocabulary, he did in fact maintain a great deal of continuity in his thought with the Reformed thinkers of the previous generation, both those of the Old Princeton tradition of the American Presbyterians and those of the Dutch Reformed "Amsterdam" theologians. While

¹¹³ Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 3d ed., 23. At this point Van Til added the footnote quoted on the last page of the previous chapter, defending the use of philosophical terms.

¹¹⁴ Van Til did speak to issues raised by pragmatism, but generally considered idealism to be a superior philosophy. He used idealism and pragmatism as paradigms for Rationalist and Irrationalist philosophies in general, but did not speak specifically to issues peculiar to existentialism or to analytic philosophy.

¹¹⁵ J. DeBoer, "Professor Van Til's Apologetics, Part I" 7.

he was much more open to the teaching of these theologians than to that of the idealist philosophers, his study of the latter also made him more critical of the former, particularly when he perceived the inconsistent wedding of biblical teaching with non-Christian philosophical ideas. This criticism he especially applied to his predecessors at Princeton with regard to their "common sense" approach to apologetics, but also in a degree to his reading of Kuyper and Dooyeweerd and their context in the continental philosophical traditions.