**Presuppositional Apologetics**

**2015 ICEC**

Resources:

**The Universe Next Door. James Sire Intervarsity Press**

Five Views on Apologetics Steven B. Cowan Zondervan 2000

God Does Exist Michael A. Robinson Authorhouse 2006

Always Ready Greg L. Bahnsen Covenant Media Foundation 1996

Christian Apologetics Cornelius Van Til 2003

First, let us look as some major categories/approaches to Christian Apologetics

**Classical Apologetics** (also known as two-step apologetics).

The basic view

The first step toward creating faith in people is to convince them of theism.

Emphasized rational arguments for the existence of God.

Most famous proponent: Thomas Aquinas.

Also: CS Lewis? William Lane Craig Norman Geissler

1. Cosmological Argument God is the uncaused cause. Craig: Kalaam Cosmological Argument

2. Teleological Argument Argument from design

3. Moral Argument

4. Ontological Argument

5. Etc.

**Evidential Apologetics**

Emphasizes historical evidence, evidence for the resurrection, fulfilled prophecies or any other positive evidence that supports belief in the inspiration of the Bible.

In a sense, this approach has no philosophical commitment. It is a whatever works methodology.

Principle proponents: Josh McDowell, J. P. Moreland, Gary Habermass

**Cumulative Case Apologetics**

Similar to Evidential Apologetics, but more systematic and geared to creating something like a legal argument. Feinberg, Lee Strobel.

**Presuppostional Apologetics/World View Apologetics**

Begins by analyzing the presuppositions of various world views and then analyzes which best explains reality as it actually is.

The most well known supporters of Presuppositional Apologetics are the two Reformed Presuppositionalists Cornelius Van Til, Greg Bahnsen and John Frame.

I will make a distinction between the presuppositionalism of Van Til and Bahnsen which I fairly strongly reject and the World View apologetic approach which I believe can be very helpful.

**Reformed Epistemological Apologetics** It is rational to believe without “evidence.” Apologetics based on religious experience alone.

Chief Proponent: Alvin Plantinga (William Lane Craig has been mentioned because he always includes these kinds of arguments)

Historically related to Calvinism, and thus the name.

**Fideism.**

Faith without evidence. Faith which is based on evidence is not true faith. Christianity requires a leap of faith. Sorek Kierkegaard. Karl Barth..

Presuppositional Apologetics.

The leaders of the presuppositional apologetics movement are Cornelius Van Til (1895-1987) Reformed theologian and presuppositional apologist. Born in Holland but raised in the US. Not surprisingly, he went to Calvin College! Taught first at Princeton, later at Westminster Theological Seminary.

and Greg Bahnsen 1948-1995, a student of Van Til. (also John Frame)

This view is very strongly colored by Reformed theology and Calvinism.

Because of Original Sin/Total Depravity, the human mind is so depraved that no logical argument will be an effective means to create saving faith in the unbeliever. Presuppositional Apologists, naturally, strongly emphasize the sovereignty of God (over and above his love, for example) The only choice is to ask the person to accept by formal presupposition the Christian world view. The point is to demonstrate that only under the Christian World View does reality make sense.

(be aware that I am going to describe a World View Apologetics that decidedly does NOT assume that there is no common ground but which does accept rational argument and evidence in an open approach to World View)

From “Always Ready” by Greg Bahnsen

Uses Coll 2:3-8 extensively as a proof text that we should not use reasoning with a non-believer. “Note, he says all wisdom and knowledge is deposited in the person of Christ—whether it be about the War of 1812, water’s chemical composition, the literature of Shakespeare or the laws of logic. Every academic pursuit and every thought must be related to Jesus Christ, for Jesus is the way the truth and the life.

“One must be presuppositionally committed to Christ in the world of thought… or else the persuasive argumentation of secular thought will delude him. Hence the Christian is obliged to presuppose the word of Christ in every area of knowledge; the alternative is delusion.

From Michael A. Robinson:

“Everything that opposes the truth of Christianity will be false. Everything.”

Augustine: A man must believe in order to understand. Reason without conversion avails nothing. (That is why Luther was very skeptical of the Scholastics.)

The Christian should (Proverbs 26:4-5):

1. Refuse to answer in terms of the fool’s presuppositions. In other words do not defend your Christianity logically or by reason.

(for example do not try to explain why a supposed contradiction is in fact not a contradiction or do not try to defend why God uses violence in the OT.)

2. Answer in terms of the fool’s presuppositions in order to show where they lead, namely to epistemogical futility.

He has the NERVE to claim that this is how we should apply 1 Peter 3:15!!!!

Van Til: “The struggle between Christian theism and its opponents covers the whole field of knowledge. Christian theism’s fundamental contention is just this, that nothing whatsoever can be known unless God can be and is known.

We defeat the unbeliever in argument by walking away from the argument.

“The fool-oriented question is to be put aside.”

Bahnsen: How to do apologetics? “by attacking the unbeliever’s position at its foundation.” (ie by challenging his presuppositions as foolish)—to show that he has no intelligible place to stand. “The pseudo-wisdom of the world must be reduced to foolishness.” He goes on and on about the foolishness and stupidity of those who are not Christians.

Robinson: “He despises biblical morality and desires sin. He is an intellectual criminal because he is a moral criminal first.”

Important concepts of this school of Presuppositional Apologists:

The myth of neutrality

Van Til: There is no neutral middle ground where the Christian and the unbeliever can agree.

Robinson:

The Christian who strives after neutrality in his thought… is reduced to apostate thought patterns and absorbed into the world of unbelief.

Neutrality is nothing short of immorality. (abusing James 4:4)

There is no common ground.

He forcefully declares that there is no neutral ground—therefore there is no common ground. The unbeliever needs simply to declare total unconditional surrender and the believer is foolish to present any arguments to this person which would appeal to anything he knows. “No demilitarized zone exists between the camp of unbelief and the forces obedient to Christ.”

Bahnsen:

Yet, he claims there is common ground, but says that this common ground is “owned” by the believer. The best we can have is formal agreement.

Van Til: The only “common ground” is found in the sinner’s sense of deity that lies within because he/she was made in the image of God. (here the reformed epistemologist will agree)

1. It is dogmatic and absolutistic. His response: “It appears dogmatic and absolutistic because it is dogmatic and absolutistic.” It demonstrates a kind of spiritual arrogance. Rather than notice that this accusation is at least partially true, he quotes Jesus’ commandments not to be that way and simply says that Christians should not act that way (but then continues to act that way himself)

He justifies this attitude by quoting Romans 3:4. “Let God be found true and every man a liar.”

2. The presuppositionalist is claiming that non-believers know nothing.

3. The presuppositionalist argument would prevent any meaningful discussion or argumentation with the unbeliever. There is no common ground from which to begin a useful discussion.

He admits that # 2 and 3 are true as well. The only reason the unbeliever has any true knowledge of ANYTHING is that he has hijacked this basis for doing so from Christianity. (How can he explain knowledge gained by people before Christ?)

Some other random thoughts and quotes:

D. R. Trethewie describes Van Til's system as nothing more than "a priori dogmatic transcendental irrationalism, which he has attempted to give a Christian name to.

Much of the good behavior of atheists and agnostics are based on things they have hijacked from the Christian world view. To the extent that they live well, it is because it is consistent with the Christian world view.

Bahnsen:

He accuses those who seek to provide rational arguments for their faith of being prideful—trying to be saved by their superior intellect.

Conclusion:

I agree with VanTil, Bahnsen and others that the Christian World View is the only one which can rationally explain reality, but I do not agree that we have no common ground and that we cannot find any neutral ground from which to discuss the Christian World View with our friends. Total depravity is a poor starting point for developing a Christian Apologetic.

World View Apologetics:

1. Until the 1960’s or so, one could assume that nearly anyone we shared with had a Christian/theisitic perspective, including the idea that there is a source of ultimate authority.

2. All this has changed. Today, when you share with people, you may come across a naturalist, a Buddhist pantheist, a Postmodern relativist or a New Age pantheist/dualist/mysticist/animist.

3. Yet, ironically, the American version of these things inevitably have hijacked much of Christian theology into their own personal theology.

-the idea that God is personal

-the idea that life really has purpose

-the idea that God is essentially good

-the idea that there is moral “good” and an ethical mandate to do good.

-the idea that justice will prevail.

Much or all of which is not supported by the world view that they may think they believe in. These are self-contradictory beliefs which we ought to confront!

* The perspective one uses to process and interpret information received about the world.
* James W. Sire “A world view is a set of presuppositions (ie. assumptions) which we hold about the basic makeup of our world.”

James W. Sire, *TheUniverse Next Door*

**Qualities of a “good” world view:**

1. It is “true”

There is no virtue and there is very rarely an advantage in being wrong.

**“True” = consistent with reality**. Predictions made using that world view will agree with what we know and what we observe.

**The Correspondence Theory of Truth**.

If a belief is in clear contradiction with well-established facts about the world, then it is not true.

2. It successfully answers the important questions humans ask.

* 1. What is the prime reality? (What is the nature of God?)
* 2. What am I?
* 3. What happens to a person at death?
* 4. Why is it possible for us to know anything at all?
* 5. How do we know what is right and wrong?
* 6. What is my purpose in life?
* 7. Why does anything at all exist?

3. Those who ascribe to it are **better human beings** for having taken this as their world view.

World Views:

1. Animism/Polytheism

2. Pantheism

3. Dualism

4. Materialism

5. Deism

6. Theism

Naturalism/Scientific Materialism

* The belief that the only reliable or valid instrument to deciding the truth or even the value of any proposition is the scientific method.
* No basis for ethics or morality, no supernatural, no God, no truth (except that found by science), no consciousness, no “I.” Justice is a figment of our imagination.
* Scientific Materialism accepts only one reality: the physical universe, composed as it is of matter and energy.  Everything that is not physical, measurable, or deducible from scientific observations, is considered unreal. Life is explained in purely mechanical terms, and phenomena such as Mind and Consciousness are considered nothing but epiphenomena - curious by-products, of certain complex physical processes (such as brain metabolism)

Postmodernism: The end of truth. There is no truth. Truth, if it exists, is determined by those who accept it. No basis for morality, ethics, objective good and evil.

Hinduism

* Maya. The physical world is an illusion.
* Brahman. Universal soul. Pantheism
* The goal: Nirvana; oneness with the universal soul which is within yourself. To lose yourself. To dissolve into nothingness
* “There is no holy life. There is no war between good and evil. There is no sin and no redemption. None of these things matter to the real you. But they all matter hugely to the false you, the one who believes in the separate self. You have tried to take your separate self, with all its loneliness and anxiety and pride, to the door of enlightenment. But it will never go through, because it is a ghost.”   
  ―Deepak Chopra

Hindu Cosmology: cyclic wheel of time. Repeated cycles of death and rebirth. Universe eternal. is patently false.

Is this a good world view?

The physical world is real and it is good.

The universe is not eternal.

Evil is NOT an illusion

Does it answer the important questions?

It does better than postmodernism or naturalism! But what is our purpose?

To disappear? What is our value, as individuals? None?

Does accepting this world view make one a better person?

* + Debatable. Better than naturalism. Karma. Self-focus and dispassion are not helpful.
  + Suffering is not real. Is that a helpful concept?
  + Evil is not real. Is that a helpful concept?

The Hindu world view has man looking inward, not outward.

Note: Christian groups do the lion’s share of benevolent work in India. Why? Because we have a better world view! The Christian response to suffering is compassion.

Buddhism:

The Four Noble Truths of Siddhartha:

* Suffering is not getting what one wants.
* The cause of suffering is desire which leads to rebirth.
* The way to end suffering is to end desire.
* The way to the end of desire and of suffering is the eight-fold path.

(Right viewpoint (the four noble truths), Right values, Right speech, Right actions, Right livelihood, Right effort, Right mindfulness, Right meditation

* Buddhism encourages dispassion, not compassion.

The goal of Buddhism:

**The goal of Buddhism is nirvana: as state of non-beingness—to lose one’s individuality, which was an illusion in the first place.**

Is Buddhism a good world view?

Is it true that the world is an illusion?

Is it true that time is like a cycle—that the universe is eternal?

Is it good to practice dispassion rather than compassion?

Purpose in life? To enter a state of non-beingness. To end emotion.

A good world view?

Is dispassion a good approach to evil and suffering?

Again, Christian groups do most of the benevolent work in majority Buddhist countries.

Islamic Worldview:

Monotheistic, of course.

God is very distant from mankind. Much in common with the Greek idea of God in that sense.

In Islam, Allah determines everything, even who will choose to follow him. Sura 2:142, 6:39 6:125

Inshallah God willing. It is God’s will that people suffer.

Salvation by own effort

(40:9, 39:61, 7:43)

Charity atones for sins

(2:271,277)

Earn grace.

Earn favor of Allah.

Earn salvation.

Earn paradise.

Islam: Salvation is earned through the efforts of those who were pre-selected by Allah to inhabit a very sensual paradise.

Christianity: Salvation is granted by the grace of a loving God to those who, through faith and repentance and baptism accept that love.

**The Christian World View**

* 1. The physical world is:

a. real b. created and c. essentially good.

* 2. There exists a parallel unseen spiritual reality which is not limited to or defined by the physical reality.
* 3. The creator of both the physical and spiritual realm is the God who is revealed and who reveals himself in the Bible.
* 4. Human beings have both a physical and a spiritual nature, but the spiritual nature is more essential as it is eternal.
* 5. Although the physical world is good, evil does exist. Such evil is the result of freedom of will given to created beings and their subsequent decision to use that freedom to “sin” (defined as transgressing the will of God).
* 6. There is a definite right and wrong for human behavior which is determined by God.

Christianity answers the big questions:

* How did I get here?
* Why am I here?
* Where am I going?
* Why are human beings able to comprehend the universe?
* Why is there pain and suffering and evil in the world?
* The Problem of Sin (the substitutionary death of Jesus)
  + Romans 7:24,25
* The Problem of Suffering (compassion)
  + Matthew 9:35-36
* The Problem of Death
  + 1 Corinthians 15:54-56

Things the world would lack if not for Christianity and the Christian World View

* Science
* Abolition of Slavery (Wilberforce)
* Civil Rights (Locke, Martin Luther King Jr. )
* Women’s Rights
* Christian groups do a majority of all benevolent work in the world (James 1:27, Micah 6:8)

Q: How should we “do” world view apologetics? Answer: Follow Paul’s example.

Acts 17:16-34

Paul confronted the Stoics and Epicureans of his day.

Theology and evangelism:

Notice Paul in Acts 17:16-34

v. 17 he reasoned in the Synagogue in the market and with the Greek philosophers

He found common ground. “I see that you are extremely religious in every respect.” v. 22

v. 18 He confronted Epicurean and Stoic philosophy of his day

v. 22f Paul expounded on Christian theology.

God is Creator. (v. 24, 28) He exists outside of Creation. (disproves pantheism and Stoicism)

God is close by. (v. 27 he is not far from us) (disproves deism and Epicureanism)

God is personal and has given us a purpose. (v. 27)

God will bring everything into judgment. Evil will be defeated (disproves dualism) v. 30,31

Paul quotes from **Aretas,** a Stoic Philosopher. “For we are his offspring.”

Finally, ¾ of the way through his treatise, he introduces Jesus.

He had to confront their idea of God before Jesus could make any sense to them.

Philosophical/Theological background

**Greek Philosophy/Theology:**

1. Pytharorus, Plato, etc.

The physical world is corrupt, decaying, ugly, essentially evil.

There exists a higher, greater reality in the “heavens” The quintessence.

The goal, to approach the “heavens” through contemplation, philosophy, reasoning.

This highly affected Gnostic thinking.

Essentially dualistic. Jehovah an evil/physical God

The real God is deistic, VERY far removed,

Jesus is some sort of lower level emanation of that very distant ultimate reality.

2. Gnosticism Dualistic perspective. Battle between the physical (evil) and the spiritual (good). God is extremely distant from man. God emanates Aeons from which come various lower emanations, one of whom is the evil God Yaweh, and one of whom is the good God Jesus. Jesus was not a physical being. He temporarily occupied the body of the person we know of as Jesus. Knowledge of truth gained through ritual and deep, hidden truth. Thus… Gnosticism. This is a natural development from Platonic thinking. Pleuroma, Aeons….. Jesus gave the “special” knowledge to the initiates, who pass it along to initiates.

Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Judas, etc…

3. Epicureanism Deists. The creator is very distant—does not interfere with human lives. We carve out our own place in the world. Fatalistic. Some responded to Epicureanism by totally pleasing their senses, others by asceticism. The greatest good is from simple pleasures.

4. Stoicism. Panentheists. God is an impersonal force which fills the world.

Panentheism. God is in all (as opposed to pantheism: God is all). Self-control and fortitude are the greatest virtues.