

Wikipedia Definitions

Presuppositional apologetics is a school of Christian apologetics in distinction from Thomistic (sometimes called "traditional" or "classical") apologetics and evidentialist apologetics, which, respectively, concentrate on logical proofs for the existence of God and various evidences that support the probable existence of God. The key discriminator is that presuppositional apologetics denies that there can be a neutral set of assumptions on which to reason with a non-Christian, and thus, if the Christian is to be true to his beliefs, he must assume from the beginning the truth of the supernatural revelation contained in the Bible. Presuppositional apologetics is most common within Reformed circles of Christianity.

Varieties of Presuppositionalism

There are at least two systems of apologetics that commonly are called presuppositional. The first -- and by far the most widely followed -- was developed by Cornelius Van Til and his students, especially John Frame and Greg Bahnsen. The second was developed by Gordon Clark and is sometimes referred to as Fideism.

Van Tillian Presuppositionalism

Apologists who follow Van Til earned the label "presuppositional" because of their central tenet that the Christian must presuppose (i.e. assume in advance) the supernatural revelation of the Bible as the ultimate arbiter of truth and error while arguing with the unbeliever. Christians, they say, can assume nothing less because all meaning and coherence depends on the God of the Bible existing, and thus, accepting the assumptions of non-Christians, which deny the Trinitarian God of the Bible, cannot even yield an intelligible argument.

Van Tillians will often utilize arguments from the Thomistic and evidentialist schools within their presuppositionalist framework, and since apologetics is mainly about persuasion, Frame urges it is always person relative, which is to say that the apologist must meet his opponent where he is at instead of forcing the use of one type of argument in every situation. When a debate turns philosophical (and it often does if presuppositionalists are involved), Van Tillians favor a transcendental argument, which is a sort of meta-argument about foundational principles in which the non-Christian's worldview is shown to be incoherent in and of itself and intelligible only because it borrows capital from the Christian worldview which is coherent. One example is the transcendental argument for the existence of God.

The analogy Frame gives involves a paranoid: one cannot accept the paranoid's notions of reality and expect to convince him of the truth. Instead, the apologist must proclaim the truth from his own notions of reality and trust that the paranoid can understand at some level.

Circularity

The obvious criticism of presuppositionalism is that it uses circular reasoning, which is considered a logical fallacy. Van Tillians don't deny this charge. Rather, they insist that *all* worldviews are ultimately circular and cannot justify their foundational principle except by that principle itself (e.g., sense perception provides truth because we have observed that sense perception provides truth; reason alone yields truth because it is the only thing that is reasonable; the Koran is the revelation of God because it claims to be the revelation of God; etc.). Therefore, while Van Tillians agree that circularity makes for an invalid argument in general, in the case of ultimate presuppositions, there is no other option.

If this is true, however, it means that *all* argumentation is ultimately circular, but some circular arguments are more persuasive than others. For instance, arguing *we know Jesus rose from the dead because the Bible says as much* is not likely to convince anyone, but arguing that *we know Jesus rose from the dead because more than 500 witnesses saw him, his apostles were transformed by that truth and died for it (and no man would die for something he believed to be a lie), and the Bible declares it* is no less circular in the end but is somewhat more likely to persuade. Thus presuppositionalists utilize evidence from other

disciplines (e.g. physical sciences, archeology, philosophy, etc.) -- understood with the Christian presuppositions -- to argue in broader circles.

Clarkian Presuppositionalism

Clark and his followers treat the truth of the Scriptures as an axiom of their system, which cannot be proven or disproven. Rather it, like all axioms, must be tested for consistency within the worldview. This test for internal contradiction exemplifies Clark's strict reliance on the laws of logic (He famously translates the first verse of the Gospel of John as "In the beginning was the Logic, and the Logic was with God, and the Logic was God." By contrast, some Van Tillians have suggested that God might be "above the laws of logic" in some sense.). Thus, in order to invalidate non-Christian worldviews, one must simply show how a different presupposition results in necessary logical contradictions.

Clark admitted, however, that there could be more than one apparently coherent worldview and that one could not test all the implications of any worldview without omniscience. Nonetheless, he believed that this method was effective in many practical cases (e.g. for secular humanism, dialectical materialism, etc.) and that, in the end, each of us must simply choose (i.e., make an informed selection) from among seemingly consistent worldviews the one that most adequately answers life's questions and seems the most internally coherent. (Some Van Tillian critics suggest that the concept of coherence itself must be defined in terms of Christian presuppositions but is instead being used by Clark as a neutral principle for discerning the truth of any proposition.)

Using this approach, Clark labored to expose the contradictions of many worldviews that were in vogue in his day and to defend the Christian worldview by proving its consistency over against those who attacked it. His unflagging use of logic sometimes led him to what most Reformed theologians consider rather unorthodox ideas on such topics as the problem of evil -- topics which are most often treated by theologians as paradoxes or apparent contradictions not resolvable by human logic.

With regard to other schools of apologetics, Clark suggested that the cosmological argument was not just unpersuasive but also logically invalid (because it begged the question), and he similarly dismissed the other Thomistic arguments. As a staunch critic of empiricism, he did not tend to make much use of evidential arguments, which yield likelihoods and probabilities rather than logical certainties (*viz.* coherence or incoherence).

Resources

Books

- Greg Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings and Analysis*, P & R Press, July 1998; ISBN 0875520987.
- Gordon Clark, *A Christian View of Men and Things*, Trinity Foundation, 3rd edition, September 1998; ISBN 1891777017.
- Gordon Clark, *Religion, Reason, and Revelation*, Trinity Foundation, 3rd edition, 1995; ISBN 0940931869.
- John Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God*, P & R Press, February 1994; ISBN 0875522432.
- John Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought*, P & R Press, November 1995; ISBN 0875522203.
- Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, P & R Press, January 1980; ISBN 0875524834.