

# Christian Philosophy

[Cornelius Van Til](#)

Phillipsburg, NJ: Lewis J. Grotenhuis, 1956.

For many thinkers the idea of a Christian philosophy is a contradiction in terms. Christianity, they say, is based on authority and philosophy is based on reason. The Christian gets his beliefs about God and himself from Scripture. Even if his beliefs include a view of the origin, nature and destiny of the universe they are still accepted for true on the basis of the simple assertion of Scripture as the infallible Word of God. The Philosopher, on the other hand, observes the facts of the universe and seeks to order them by means of the laws of logic. Even if his beliefs are ordered by *a priori* subjective principles he nowhere recognizes an infallible authority above him. The Christian holds his life and world view because God says it is true; the philosopher holds his life and world view because or in so far as he finds it to be true. Christianity is based on authority while philosophy is based on reason and ne'er the twain shall meet.

Roman Catholics have a way of escaping this dilemma. Broadly speaking their life and world view is built up of pre-fabricated materials. The first story of the house is moulded and patterned by reason. It is set upon a foundation that has also been tested by reason. The second story of the house is moulded and patterned by authority. This second story is set upon the first by force. By a good deal of twisting and wrenching it is made to fit onto the first. Looking from a distance one might think that the resulting edifice forms a fairly unified whole.

But on looking closely one sees that the second story has been badly damaged in order to make it fit onto the first. For the god whose existence is proved by reason is the sort of god that Aristotle believes in, namely a finite god. And a finite god is no god at all from the Christian point of view. It is no wonder that the God whose attributes are set forth by authority (the second story) is not the sovereign God of Scripture at all. He is a god already adjusted to the false requirements of a reason that thinks itself independent of Him.

Unfortunately many Protestants to a large degree follow the Romanist method of combining authority and reason. They do so frequently even when

they are fighting Rome. So, for instance, Edward John Carnell argues as though the chief fault of Romanism were its empiricism and pure authoritarianism. He would replace empiricism with a sort of Cartesian a priorism. Starting with his a priorism he would also cure the pure authoritarianism of Rome by testing all revelations by a criterion that is independent of them. "Accept that revelation which, when examined, yields a system of thought which is horizontally self-consistent and which vertically fits the facts of history."<sup>1</sup>

Does this procedure of Carnell's differ from that of Rome? Not essentially. In both cases the foundation of the house is laid by reason apart from and prior to revelation. In both cases the second story is artificially and by main force made to fit onto the first. "Bring on your revelations! Let them make peace with the law of contradiction and the facts of history, and they will deserve a rational man's assent."<sup>2</sup>

Who is a "rational man"? If he were the regenerated Christian man, he would not thus place his own criterion of truth above that of God. The Bible claims to interpret man to himself. According to Christianity man is God's creature. He is made in God's image. He should think God's thoughts after him. He should be a covenant-keeper. He should primarily be obedient. As God's creature he cannot at any point exhaustively penetrate the meaning of God's revelation to him. He must therefore use his God given powers of logical reasoning for the purpose of ordering the revelation into systematic form. But the "System" which he is thus bound to make is not identical with the plan of God. His system is, in the nature of the case, analogical of God's "system."

How then can the "rational man" set up a criterion above Christianity itself? Only if he has not yet learned to see himself as Christianity sees him. Only if he does not yet see himself as a creature of God. And that is only when he does not see himself as a sinner in the sight of God. Only he who rejects the Scriptural doctrines of the fall and of creation can logically test all systems of revelation by a criterion that is above them all.

Now it is natural that Arminian theologians should follow the example of Rome in interpreting the "facts" of the universe and man, the interpreter of these facts, in terms of a point of reference in man himself as autonomous. For it is of the essence of Arminianism, as of Roman-ism, to tone down the revelation of Scripture till it fits in with supposed requirements of reason. So, for instance, both

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<sup>1</sup> *An Introduction to Christian Apologetics*, Grand Rapids, Mich. 1948.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

reject the Scriptural doctrine of the Sovereignty of God. Both reject this doctrine because when it is tested by the "fact" of human freedom and by the "law of contradiction" which every "rational man" must accept, it is unacceptable. We therefore expect that when Arminians speak of a Christian philosophy they will mean by it a hodge-podge similar to that of Rome. The surprising thing is that those who hold the reformed theology (as, E. J. Carnell) should, none the less, follow Descartes instead of Calvin in their conception of human reason, thus introducing into philosophy and apologetics the very idea of autonomy which they so vigorously reject as the root-heresy of Romanism and Arminianism in theology.

From what has been said so far it appears that if a philosophy is really to be a Christian philosophy it must interpret its own starting point and its own criterion in terms of the infallible authority of Scripture. And it is only Reformed thinkers who have the courage to do this. Romanists and Arminians do not even accept the unlimited authority of Scripture in the formation of their systems of theology. How then can we expect them to formulate a Christian system of philosophy? Here they can so plausibly argue that even the Bible recognizes the rights of "reason." Does not the great apostle Paul himself appeal to "reason" in the first chapter of Romans? Did he not appeal to the truth discovered by reason and build upon it the second story of faith in Phrygia Acts 16 and on Mars' Hill? Acts 17

The one thing constantly forgotten in the appeal to these and similar passages is the fact that in these cases the appeal is made to what men ought to know in view of the fact of God's revelation to them. God is clearly revealed as man's creator and provider, as man's benefactor and judge. But man has fallen into sin. He therefore wants to escape from the face of God. Invariably he suppresses this revelation. He sets the ideal of comprehensive knowledge for himself. Then when he cannot point by point match his system with that of God, he concludes that "Reality" is unknown and that he is, in consequence, not face to face with well-known requirements of God.

Of course, God's "system" will not fit into Plato's system, into Aristotle's system or into Kant's system. When Paul appealed to "reason" he asked the "rational man" to become reasonable. And to become reasonable meant to recognize the facts of his own creaturehood and sinfulness. It meant to allow himself as well as the facts about him to be interpreted in terms of a criterion above him, the criterion of his creator and judge.

But, it may be said, all this is good theology. Theologically the Calvinist is certainly right. If a philosophy is to be Christian it must be Calvinist. But is it then philosophy?

Our answer is that a life and world view that is all-comprehensive and thoroughly self-conscious may fairly be called a philosophy.

Non-Christian thinkers have for centuries usurped the term philosophy. They claimed to be the only ones that followed the facts and operated by principles of reason. They pretended and still pretend to do that which every honest man who opens his eyes and uses his intellect ought to do. As a matter of fact on any but the Christian, and more specifically the Calvinist view, facts are meaningless and reason operates in a vacuum. On any but the Christian basis man, using this reason, is a product of Chance and the facts which he supposedly orders by the "law of contradiction" are also products of Chance. Why should a "law of contradiction" resting on Chance be better than a revolving door moving nothing out of nowhere into no place? Only on the presupposition that the self-contained God of Scripture controls all things, can man know himself or anything else. But on this presupposition the whole of his experience makes good sense. Thus a truly Christian philosophy is the only possible philosophy. Other philosophies are or should be called such by courtesy. Those who crucify reason while worshipping it; those who kill the facts as they gather them, ought not really to be called philosophers.

Insisting upon "reason" as the test of truth they have completely divorced the operation of "reason" from the turmoil of fact. They cannot find coherence in anything on their principle. Fear, nothing but fear in the dark, remains. Aldous Huxley's latest novel "Ape and Essence" pictures strikingly the inevitable result of a philosophy that is not a definite Christian philosophy.

A truly Christian philosophy, a philosophy based frankly on the presuppositions of the truth of the Christian religion, is now being worked out by Professors D. H. Th. Vollenhoven and H. Dooyeweerd of Amsterdam and by H. G. Stoker of Potchefstroom. They employ the profoundest insights of Augustine, Calvin and others and are building, for the first time in history, an imposing and comprehensive structure of Christian philosophical interpretation. Most important of all they have developed a methodology which enables one to do

justice to the unity and variety of human experience without falling into either rationalism or irrationalism.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Van Til, Cornelius ; Sigward, Eric H.: *The Works of Cornelius Van Til, 1895-1987*. electronic ed. New York : Labels Army Co., 1997