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"PHILOSOPHIC FOUNDATIONS"
A REPLY

It is only very recently that my attention has been called to the April issue of *The Evangelical Quarterly*, in which my "Philosophic Foundations" has been reviewed by Dr. C. Van Til. Both the work and the criticism are, in my judgment, of such Evangelical importance, that I feel sure you will allow me space in your *Quarterly* to reply to the criticisms in as far as they appear to me to be untenable, and an obstacle to the evangelical purpose for which my work was composed, and for which I shall still earnestly press it upon the co-operation of those who know the grave sceptical hindrances that abound to-day, both in Britain and America, to the acceptance of Holy Scripture as the word of God. This has been a great pain to my heart, as it was to Bishop Butler in the first half of the eighteenth century, when he published his notable "Analogy", meeting and overcoming scepticism on its own ground, thus leading men, as I am striving to do, to the "gates of the gospel". How far this contributed to the great evangelical awakening at the dawn of the nineteenth century cannot be easily over-estimated. Nor can any ingenuity explain away the plain fact that the greatest evangelist of history, the apostle Paul, used a similar method to break down the idolatrous unbelief of the Athenians, and thus to lead them to "the gates of the gospel", so that some of them heard the word of life, and entered in. "That which could be known of God" by the sincere exercise of the reasoning mind was made manifest to them in such a way, that it left them without any excuse for rejecting the revelation of God in Christ Jesus. Yet this important function of the reasoning mind is one of the basic postulates of a free and full philosophy, which Dr. Van Til insists on rejecting.

I

A divergent angle of this crucial kind was bound to lead to greater divergence, for this basic postulate made reconciliation

impossible. But, before examining these divergences, I desire to express my sincere appreciation of the high and kindly tone of the whole review. It is such a tone as is worthy of one seeker after truth trying to appraise the work of another seeker after truth, and gives a sense of comradeship in spite of considerable divergence. The opening of the review gave me hope of having secured a powerful ally, and I was certainly disappointed to find such a thinker sharing what I know to be the view largely held by much inferior thinkers—men of large dogmatism and small range of vision, with no knowledge or appreciation whatever of philosophic thought. This fact in itself does not by any means prove these views to be erroneous, but they complicate the antagonism to what I venture to call the Divine freedom of the philosophic search through heaven and earth. For philosophic thinking is only the operation of the reasoning mind of man to the farthest height and depth of possibility. I had much rather face one serious type of opposition than a nondescript variety in which there can be little mutual sympathy or understanding. Therefore I am writing this reply, not only as a specific answer to the reviewer's strictures, but also in the hope that I shall win him to a wider and truer view of the function of a true philosophy in breaking down those barriers of scepticism that are being erected from time to time, and notably in our own day, against the acceptance of the oracles of God and the Christian faith. You cannot win a narrow and prejudiced dogmatist to any wider vision, but if enlightened minds catch the vision, and join in sending it far and near, the opposition of undisciplined prejudice will count for less and less. I am in dead earnest about this, because I am not fighting for myself, or for my philosophy, but for the breaking down of subtle barriers which are being set up against the acceptance of the Christian faith by which I live.

It is at the close of his review that Dr. Van Til fully discloses his basic postulate for the only philosophy that can avoid ending in failure and falsehood. He writes as follows:

"If theological students are to be warned against Barthian irrationality, if science and philosophy students are to evaluate the 'abstractions' of science aright, they ought to be offered a truly rational philosophy, a philosophy rational from beginning to end, the philosophy based on the God of the Christian Scriptures."

He has previously anticipated thus:

“ We must needs be clear on our basic principle of interpretation. That basic principle of interpretation, there is no help for it, we must simply and frankly take from Scripture. It is nowhere else to be found.”

These sentences reveal a basic misconception, and a basic defect, which in a measure influences and vitiates the whole course of the review. The reviewer shows himself again and again to be in great difficulty, and in considerable contradiction, about the power and function of the reasoning mind in the search for, and in the apprehension of truth. From this tangle of contradiction he cannot escape until his basic postulates are radically revised. It is a very precarious position that needs to be buttressed by such a sweeping and inaccurate statement as the following:

“ It is accordingly not too severe a stricture on non-Christian systems of philosophy to say that underneath them all there is the sinner’s effort at self-justification of his declaration of independence from God.”

I leave for the present the reviewer’s unfair habit of using such labels as “ non-Christian ” and “ idealist ” philosophy, as if they essentially contained certain evil qualities which his analysis attributes to them, and cannot by any means be presented in a new and more successful way. Yet this unphilosophical insinuation regarding philosophical Idealism flows steadily through his review. For the present let me say that the great philosophic Idealists I have had the honour to know have been earnest Christian men, who would have accepted anything and everything rather than “ independence from God ”. And may I say that I, who have found nothing in Dr. Van Til’s criticisms to dim my vision of the Ideal, desire my Redeemer God in all things, and above all things, to be my all in all.

I wish to be perfectly clear about his meaning when he affirms that the only valid philosophy is that which is based on “ the God of the Christian Scriptures ”, and that the only admissible principle of interpretation must be “ simply and frankly taken from Scripture ”. I cannot take this to mean anything else than that the only allowable philosophy must begin with the Scripture revelation of God as the triune Personality of Father, Son, and Spirit. We may deal later with the question how this positively dogmatic basis is calculated to win sceptic minds to its acceptance. Dr. Van Til does not give any idea how what he calls “ Christian ” philosophy is to be built

up on this basis. It cannot be done, in his view, by any effort of the reasoning mind to erect a structure of thought arising out of this basis; for the "wicked" reasoning power of man, in its "independence from" and "hatred of" God, will be sure to erect its usual irrational superstructure of falsehood. I assume, therefore, that the "basic interpretation to be taken simply from Scripture" really means that the superstructure, as well as the foundation in the Divine Trinity, is to be rationally constructed by the minds of "Christian" philosophers from the Scripture revelation, and from that alone. But that is what thinkers have always called Christian *theology*, the attempt of the Christian mind to understand and expound the oracles of God. To call this philosophy is grossly misleading, for it contains nothing new, and the age-long definition of philosophy points to an entirely different process and attitude of thought. Nor is it rational to suppose that any new dogmatic structure of Christian theology will open new gates of acceptance to the thousands that are now being intellectually herded into scepticism.

II

Dr. Van Til seems to think that the necessarily "God-hating" human mind can be safely employed in understanding and expounding the truths revealed in Holy Scripture. It is true that this concession contradicts his fundamental view of the "wickedness" and "irrationality" of the reasoning mind of man, but, without this desperate concession, the prison-house of his thought would completely close around him. But the facts are unkind to him even in this inconsistent concession; for in the course of the Christian Centuries, false theologies have been more abundant than false philosophies; so that his supposed infallible "Christian" philosophy seems as difficult to attain as an infallible philosophy that claims all the revelations of God's wide universe for its domain. There are Christian theologians to-day, truly evangelical Christians, who would regard some of the theological ideas revealed in Dr. Van Til's review as being considerably out of accord with the teaching of the word of God. One crucial example of this must be exposed before I can complete my reply.

Dr. Van Til professes to know a philosophy that is "rational from beginning to end", but his attempt to produce it is easily seen to be a spectacular failure. He affirms that my philosophy,

like every other type of Idealism, lapses into irrationality; a statement for which he has no philosophic or theological foundation. The reason for this is that he continually returns to the unphilosophic expedient of splitting up life into little mutually exclusive compartments, instead of viewing it in its unity as an inter-related whole. He severs the world of creation from the world of special revelation, as if they were entirely unrelated, although in Scripture they are in many ways intimately bound together. He seems amazed that I recognise the same moral principle operative in the creation of the world as in its redemption, although they are connected in Scripture by the emphatic revelation that the Divine Logos, through Whom the worlds were created, was no other than the Divine Redeemer, Who “became flesh, and dwelt among men”. Above all, he divides the essence of Reason into two mutually exclusive kinds, the “created” reason of man and the uncreated reason of God, as if they differed, not only in range, but also in their essential nature. It is curious what a spell the Anglo-Roman term, “created”, casts upon many minds. It seems to suggest a cabinet-maker making a new cabinet, which stands in no essential relation to himself, being the work of his hands and nothing more. Hence Dr. Van Til reminds us with special emphasis that man’s mind is a “created” mind. Let us vary this a little by pointing out that in the first verse in the book of Genesis the Hebrew word used, however it may be translated, simply signifies “to produce”. The Scripture does not tell us, in that connection, how or why the heavens and the earth were produced by the self-sufficient Deity. That knowledge has to be gained by the study of the whole revelation of God. But even in Genesis it is made clear that it was somehow through the power of “His own image and likeness” that God created Man. It was not in the least analogous to a rational cabinet-maker constructing an irrational cabinet. The reason of God and the reason in and through which He “produced” Man must be essentially the same. The difference is not that between a created and an uncreated mind, but between the limited and the unlimited, the finite and the infinite. This is vast enough, but it is fundamentally different from the other. The other, in fact, reduces the “created” reason of Man to irrationality, and the act of creation to a meaningless surd. All the great things of the spirit in God and Man, such as love, reason, truth and

goodness, are essentially the same. To think otherwise reduces the universe to a chaos of irrationality.

My reviewer's denial of moral freedom in all the moral universe, except in God Himself, certainly amazes me. The tragic results of this denial will appear presently. Incidentally, it shows that the operations even of a trained reasoning mind may go astray even in the heart of Divine revelation; so that the supposed all-rational "Christian" philosophy may, after all, be full of blunders. Surely Dr. Van Til does not imagine that he represents the evangelical belief of to-day in denying moral freedom to moral beings. There are still a certain number of Christians, no doubt, who believe in Divine election, to the exclusion of moral freedom, but, in Britain at least, their number has long been dwindling, and to-day they represent but a small fraction of the Christian community. There are others who ignore election in favour of moral freedom. But the great majority accept both, without any serious attempt to reconcile them. There are two imperative reasons for the passive belief of this majority. The first reason is, that it is written deep in the moral and spiritual consciousness of man that moral freedom is a fundamental condition of moral life and character. The second reason is, that Holy Scripture emphasises the reality of Divine election and human moral freedom alike. I do not imagine that Dr. Van Til will require biblical quotations from me on this point; but, if he does, I will supply them in abundance. It is interesting from a philosophic, as well as a religious standpoint, to consider how the Christian mind has accepted two associated revelations which appear on the surface to be mutually contradictory. For it is clear that a distinction is instinctively made between the limited scope of the formal logical syllogism, with its compartmental definitions, and the religious and philosophic vision that harmonises the sundered halves of life in a higher unity. Dr. Van Til refuses to accept this fundamental distinction, and thinks it must be wrong because, as he says, I have received it from Hegel. It is not conducive to the discovery of truth to assume that all the ideas of the older philosophers and philosophies are to be rejected, because we cannot accept their philosophy as a whole. It is far wiser to treasure all that is valid in their great efforts, and to use it as a stairway to higher things. My reviewer would have escaped the central fatal error I find in his review if he

had allowed his mind a wider range on this cardinal conception, even at the cost of accepting it from Hegel. So Dr. Van Til's insistent notion that moral freedom belongs to the Deity alone stands philosophically condemned. With this vanishes his contention that the ascription of moral freedom to all moral beings is irrational. Once or twice he has tried to buttress his unphilosophical narrowness by emphasising the doctrine of salvation by “grace” alone. That doctrine belongs entirely to Divine revelation, and is fundamental to Christian faith and life. Even so it must be remembered that Grace itself is revealed in the word of God as the fulfilment of righteousness, and not as the negation of it.

Dr. Van Til's universe, as we have seen it materialise before us, is deprived of every vestige of freedom, until nothing remains but a rigid and barren machine. It is as rigid and inflexible and automatic as Hegel's dialectical stairway, being converted into a complete and inexorable prison from which there is no escape. It is the picture of a rational God creating an irrational universe, and not ruling over it, but simply propelling it. Is it necessary for me to say that every instinct and intuition of the mind and spirit of man rises in protest against such a degrading and futile conception of the moral life of God's universe? If we can conceive of the rational Absolute constructing such a universe, He is only free to construct it as a huge machine, and then to propel it. Dr. Van Til's Absolute may not be locked *within* the machine, like Hegel's Absolute, but it is quite as successfully and finally locked *outside* of it. My reviewer regards the ascription of free will to man as constituting irrationality. On the contrary, moral free will is the fundamental Rationality of the universe. It is only the substitution of a Machine for moral life and character in moral beings that is irrational.

When I wrote of the great “adventure” of the Absolute Spirit in creating a moral universe of freedom, the whole context of my demonstration made it quite clear that I was far from attributing uncertainty to the inviolable sovereignty of God. In contrast to Dr. Van Til's mechanical universe, the process of an automatic machine, I affirm even more strongly, if possible, that the universe of God is a universe of real and thrilling moral history, not the uninteresting and unimaginative roll of a pre-arranged machine. In such a mechanical process the endless mystery and glory of Calvary could have no place, and would be, in fact, inconceivable. I have already pointed out

that the difference between the Reason of God and the Reason of man is, that the latter is finite, while the former is infinite. The human mind can only foretell mechanical action, and I believe there are some who think it intelligent to limit the mind of the Absolute Spirit in the same way. This limitation is not valid even on the subsidiary plane of formal logic; for the Divine reason ranges far beyond ours, even as the heavens range above the earth. In the profounder conception of philosophic thought the limitation disappears in a flash of glory. To the infinite Mind, the course of the free Moral universe is as completely foreknown as that of the material creation, and their final issues are equally subject to the sovereignty of Divine pre-determination. This the Scriptures affirm, and an enlightened philosophy conceives.

III

Dr. Van Til's unphilosophic and unscriptural denial of the freedom of the moral universe leads to a conception of God which is abhorrent both to Divine revelation and to a rational philosophy. If man is devoid of moral freedom, he can neither be good nor wicked; for he is simply a driven and controlled machine. In that case, it is clear that he cannot be held responsible for anything that happens. The only One that is responsible is the Maker and Propeller of the blind machine. The significance of such a conception must oppress every rational being with a feeling of horror. There is grandeur in the conception of a mighty moral conflict, in which the agony of the cross is the centre, moving onward to the assured goal of triumph and glory. The sin that has entered in through the fundamental and eternal necessity of moral freedom, bringing immense tragedies in its train, is being countered by the essential righteousness of God in such a way that all the suffering of the warriors in the conflict will finally be crowned with "a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory". Thus both sin and suffering are explained in harmony with the character of a God of righteousness and love; and all the mystery of our travailing life is explained in the light of Him, "Who, for the sake of the joy set before Him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of God". This is a satisfying and inspiring conception of the righteous God of the universe. But in the denial of moral free will to the universe of moral

beings, there is no escape from the conclusion, that God is the pre-determining and sole Author of all evil, including sin and Satan. This inevitable conclusion is the furthest possibility of irrationality. It cannot commend the gospel of the Divine revelation to any reasoning mind, and it certainly cannot lead prejudiced scepticism “to the gates of the gospel”.

The prejudice of an irrational dogmatism has attempted in recent times to cancel the rational freedom and universal range of philosophic thought, by inventing the illegitimate label of “Christian” philosophy. This invidious device is so new and foreign to philosophy, that it would have been regarded as an irrational curiosity in my student days. Hence I have been greatly surprised to find this excrescence figure so actively and crucially in the contention of a man like Dr. Van Til. I have already shown that his “Christian” philosophy cannot be distinguished from Christian theology, and that his attempt to philosophise with his particular views of theology has led him to an irrational and mechanical *impasse* worse than the blockhouse of Hegel. It is as irrational and illegitimate to speak of “Christian” philosophy as it would be to speak of “Christian” astronomy, or any other science. No field of reasoned thought, except theology, is bound within the word of Divine revelation; else all the knowledge derived from the works of God would be closed to the mind of man. Those who really desire to find philosophic truth must get rid of a petty device which has been invented to fetter the freedom of the reasoning mind, and to secure the monopoly of truth for what is often a bigoted and unreasoning dogmatism. The reason with which God has entrusted man will never be free, until the believers in Divine revelation frankly acknowledge the many other ways in which God reveals Himself to the human mind, and seek trustfully to find and admire the essential harmony of all His works and ways.

Dr. Van Til’s division of philosophy into “Christian” and “non-Christian” is deep-dyed with this fallacious device. It is true that God’s revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ is by far His profoundest and most glorious manifestation; and this is the domain of Christian theology. It is also true that outside and beyond this supreme revelation, God has manifested Himself in many wonderful ways for the investigation of the thinking mind; and all this—the unrestricted universe of Divine revelation—is the domain of a full and complete philosophy. Yet my

reviewer invidiously labels all philosophy—except what he regards as identical with Christian theology—as “non-Christian”, with the distinct implication that all such philosophies must of necessity be a fallacy and a failure. Yet the real fallacy lies in his new and beggarly and false conception of the function and range of pure philosophic thought. There is no thought or force or fact or thing that is outside the range of the territories of philosophy. This has been its acknowledged domain from the beginning, and no invidious narrowness will ever succeed in filching a jot of its world-wide dominion. Philosophy is false to itself only when it is false to its empire, contenting itself with only a portion of its wide field of knowledge, and failing to take possession of its dominion as a whole. It is when it does this, that “Divine philosophy” misses its mark.

Philosophy is the search for the meaning of the universe by and for the reasoning mind. It is therefore different in nature from the definitely restricted area of supernatural revelation, which requires only interpretative exposition. Yet it is exceedingly important as a handmaid to religion, when it can show the ultimate bases of being to be in harmony with the word that comes directly from heaven. Then, as the apostle Paul affirms, all those that refuse to receive the Divine revelation are left “without excuse”. It is this that I have aimed at in my philosophy, and it is this that I have successfully accomplished. This is, undoubtedly, in these days of devastating academic scepticism, an instrument of the highest importance both for the defence and the propagation of the Christian faith.

IV

Philosophy is of two main kinds, Materialistic and Idealistic. Matter is made supreme and fundamental in the former kind, and Mind and Spirit in the latter. As the former is clearly irrational, we cannot hesitate to dismiss it. Idealism then remains as the only expression of rational philosophy. Dr. Van Til’s obsession about an imaginary “Christian” philosophy has blinded him to the splendour and ultimacy of philosophic Idealism. This is, the philosophy that is founded on a rock, the same rock as the foundation of Holy Scripture itself, namely, the Infinite Spirit. Its superstructure must therefore consist of the ideals, attributes, powers and glories of spirit and mind.

This is enough to show the fundamental kinship of philosophic Idealism with religion. Clearly then there is no truth or splendour of philosophic vision which does not come within its range. It is the mountain peak of philosophy. This, of course, is its potentiality. To realise its actuality there must be, as in every human quest, a long and patient and fluctuating period of development, with many great visions, and many mistakes and failures. These have been duly acknowledged in my “Philosophic Foundations”. The door was closed against development along the lines of Hegel’s method, and philosophy then degenerated into piece-meal psychologies, and into philosophies of a fragmentary kind. But it does not follow that the work of the great Idealist philosophers had been in vain, or that the development of the ideal philosophic quest could be permanently arrested. With this assurance in my mind, I watched with pain the growth of fragmentary philosophies and psychologies in our land, laden with increasing scepticism of the Divine revelation, and with little or no vision of things spiritual and eternal. I saw that this widespread philosophic scepticism was becoming, as it became towards the close of the eighteenth century, a tragic barrier to the acceptance of the Christian faith, and even to any consideration of it, by minds so perverted. The result of all this is clearly seen in the widespread irreligion of the present time. I saw that preaching the gospel to these warped and closed minds was of little use until the sceptical barriers of false philosophic teaching had been broken down by a true philosophy, which would reveal the rational basis of religion, with all its rational and spiritual ideals, and demonstrate the irrationality of disregarding the highest Divine call to the human spirit. This was the view taken by Bishop Butler in the first half of the eighteenth century, when he countered the confident sceptics on their own ground, and thus greatly assisted in opening the way for the mighty evangelical revival of the dawn of the nineteenth century.

In obedience to an inward urge, I have undertaken a similar task, and it is a joy to know that, by the undoubted help of God, I have successfully accomplished it. Dr. Van Til’s view, that I have attempted the impossible, is entirely mistaken, and is due to his misconception, which I have shown in detail, both of the function of philosophic Idealism, and of the fundamental law of moral freedom. My philosophy is an entirely

new and fruitful development of the philosophy of spirit, the great philosophy of Idealism, which is bound, in its true form, to be in alliance with the highest revelation of Divine truth. I have opened wide the door of development which was closed by Hegel's rational, but *non-moral*, Absolute, and changed his world from one of mechanical movement into one of moral freedom and spirit and life. For the first time, I believe, in the history of philosophy, I have laid the foundations of being, not in bare and mechanical movements of dialectical rationality, but in the infinite potency and freedom of an infinite moral Personality. In this philosophy, Reason is no longer a pendulating machine, but a personal moral Infinite creating and governing a free moral universe, and shaping it to a predetermined end. My philosophy is a new philosophy of freedom, the ideal freedom for which the world is blindly groping. As in the case of every new truth that has been presented to the world, this new truth will have to fight its way against stereotyped opposition. The sceptics will oppose it, because it makes scepticism irrational. The anti-evangelical modernists will oppose it, because it leads directly in the direction of the gospel of the cross. The narrow dogmatist will oppose it, because he fears it will demolish the walls of his little self-enclosed castle. The true evangelical ought to give it a great welcome, and rejoice in a new philosophy that demolishes the barriers of scepticism, that are hindering the acceptance of the gospel over so wide an area to-day. But I fear that such prejudiced criticisms as are found in Dr. Van Til's review will deceive many, and hinder the consecrated work which I have set out to do. Not that it can fail. This new vision of philosophy is so splendidly true that I make bold to prophesy, that it can never die. Yet the fruits of it may be delayed by the inconsiderate opposition of enemies who ought to be friends. If Dr. Van Til chooses to attempt to answer this article, I shall be quite content to let the two articles go forth side by side, and to allow discerning minds to judge between them. It would be better still, if he would reconsider his biased and untenable positions, and aid me in breaking down ramparts, and in opening the doors for the great evangelical development of influence and power which must come sooner or later.

JOHN THOMAS.

Author of "Philosophic Foundations".