

VAN TIL AND SELF-DECEPTION

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The following is an excerpt from an essay written by Dr. Bahnsen in July, entitled "The Crucial Concept of Self-Deception in Presuppositional Apologetics" for publication in the Westminster Theological Journal next Spring, in commemoration of Cornelius Van Til, who was born in 1895.

. . . Van Til's position is that the Christian can challenge the non-Christian approach to interpreting human experience "only if he shows the non-Christian that even in his virtual negation of God, he is still really presupposing God" (*A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, p.13). He puts the point succinctly in saying: "Anti-theism presupposes theism" (*A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, p. xii). The intellectual achievements of the unbeliever, as explained in *The Defense the Faith*, are possible only because he is "borrowing, without recognizing it, the Christian ideas of creation and providence" (1st ed., p.355). The non-Christian thus "makes positive contributions to science in spite of his principles" (*A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, p. 22) - because he is inconsistent. Van Til replies directly to the charge that we are now considering with these words:

The first objection that suggests itself may be expressed in the rhetorical question "Do you mean to assert that non-Christians do not discover truth by the methods they employ?" The reply is that we mean nothing so absurd as that. The implication of the method here advocated is simply that non-Christians are never able and therefore never do employ their own method consistently.... 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.... Thus there is absolutely certain proof for 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 (*The Defense of the Faith*, p.120).

The sense of deity discussed by Calvin on the basis of Paul's doctrine in Romans 1 provides Van Til not only with an apologetical point of contact, but also with an account of how those who disclaim any belief in God can know much about most subjects (*ibid.*, p.103).

The knowledge of God which every man has as the image of God and as surrounded by God's clear revelation assures us, then, that all men are in contact with the truth. Not even sin in its most devastating expressions can remove this knowledge, for Van Til says "sin would not be sin except for this ineradicable knowledge of God" (*ibid.*, p.173). It is this knowledge of God, of which Paul speaks in Romans 1, that Van Til identifies as the knowledge which all men have in common, contending that such common knowledge is the guarantee that every man can

contribute to the progress of science, and that some measure of unity in that task can exist between believers and unbelievers (ibid., pp. 173-174, 192).

Because he is convinced that self-consciousness presupposes God-consciousness (ibid., p.257) the presuppositionalist can assert then, In the most important sense, "There are no atheists" (ibid., p. 173). Van Til clearly relies very heavily on Paul in making such a surprising claim.

The apostle Paul speaks of the natural man as actually possessing the knowledge of God (Rom. 1:19-21). The greatness of his sin lies precisely in the fact that "when they knew God, they glorified him not as God." No man can escape knowing God. It is indelibly involved in his awareness of anything whatsoever.... We have at once to add Paul's further instruction to the effect that all men, due to the sin within them, always and in all relationships seek to "suppress" this knowledge of God (Rom.1:18).... Deep down in his mind every man knows that he is the creature of God and responsible to God. Every man, at bottom, knows that he is a covenant breaker. But every man acts and talks as though this were not so. It is the one point that cannot bear mentioning in his presence (ibid., pp. 109, 111).

Van Til speaks of the unbeliever sinning against his "better knowledge" -- that "it is of the greatest possible importance" to acknowledge that man knows God in some "original sense" (ibid., p.100; *Christian Theory of Knowledge*, p.46).

Now then, just because knowledge is a category of belief (*viz.*, justified true belief), and because it can reduce unnecessary philosophical complications throughout this discussion, we could just as well speak of the unbeliever's suppressed belief about God as we could speak of his suppressed knowledge of God. In fact, Van Til makes his point in just that way also in his writings.

To be sure, all men have faith. Unbelievers have faith as well as believers. But that is due to the fact that they too are creatures of God. Faith therefore always has content. It is against the content of faith as belief in God that man has become an unbeliever. As such he tries to suppress the content of his original faith.... And thus there is no foundation for man's knowledge of himself or of the world at all.... When this faith turns into unbelief this unbelief cannot succeed in suppressing fully the original faith in God. Man as man is inherently and inescapably a believer in God. Thus he can contribute to true knowledge in the universe (*The Defense of the Faith*, pp.385-386).

Our brief rehearsal of presuppositional apologetics has brought us step by step to the realization that a crucial component in Van Til's perspective, one that is necessarily contained in any credible account of its functioning, is the conviction that the non-Christian is self-deceived about God - that the one who does not believe in God actually does believe in God. The cogency of presuppositionalism is tied up with the intelligibility of this notion of self-deception. If we do not find our point of contact with the unbeliever in his suppressed knowledge of God and reason with him in such a way as to "distinguish carefully between the natural man's own conception of himself and the Biblical conception of him" - that is, if we do not proceed on the firm premise that the unbeliever is engaged in self-deception of the most significant religious kind - then, according to Van Til, we "cannot challenge his most basic epistemological assumption" that his

reasoning can indeed be autonomous. And immediately Van Til adds, "on this everything hinges" (ibid., p.110).

The concept of self-deception is critical to Van Til's presuppositionalism. Everything hangs on it, according to him. If there should be something suspect or muddled about the notion of self-deception here, then the entire presuppositional system of thought is suspect and unacceptable as well. Its key argumentative thrust relies completely on the truth of the claim that unbelievers are suppressing what they believe about God the Creator. That is why I stated at the beginning that the self-deception depicted in Romans I is religiously momentous and also

why the unbeliever's self-deception is a pivotal notion - a *sine qua non* truth - for the presuppositional method of defending the faith.

However, as I also wrote at the outset of this essay in reference to Romans 1, the notion of self-deception is philosophically enigmatic. It is more than just a bit odd, is it not, to say that someone believes what he does not believe! Indeed, it sounds downright self-contradictory. At just the crucial point where the presuppositionalist must make reference to clear and compelling considerations in order to give a justifying and credible account of the very heart of this apologetical method, he seems to take an unsure step into philosophical perplexity. It hardly seems to the critics of presuppositionalism that its account of itself explains the unclear in terms of the clear. It appears rather to move from the unclear to the even more unclear. For now the obvious question, if not challenge, will arise: what could it mean for an unbeliever to simultaneously be a believer? Is the notion of self-deception at all coherent?

The quite enigmatic character of his conception of the unbeliever as self-deceived is confessed very plainly in Van Til's writings, where he admits that the problem of the unbeliever's knowledge "has always been a difficult point..., often the one great source of confusion on the question of faith and its relation to reason" (*An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, p.26).