
Pro Rege

Volume 9 | Number 3

Article 5

March 1981

Response to Van Til

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Recommended Citation

Plantinga, Alvin (1981) "Response to Van Til," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 9: No. 3, 29 - 30.

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Response to Van Til

Professor Nick Van Til's "Modernizing the Case for God" needs a lot more work; most of it is misleading and a good bit is outright mistaken. I want to call attention to some of the wholly mistaken comments he makes about some of the things I've written.

On p. 31 Van Til makes the following remark: "While it can hardly be less than disappointing to Reformed Christians that Plantinga harks back to scholasticism in using analogy to move from the nature of man to the nature of God, it must be even more disappointing that in connection with the problem of evil Plantinga limits God to what is logically possible according to human understanding of the law of contradiction."

In both cases I decline the compliment. According to the first half of this sentence, I "use analogy to move from the nature of man to the nature of God . . ." I have done no such thing. Van Til is referring to what I said in *God and Other Minds*; but there the topic of God's nature, or of analogy between God's nature and man's nature, never so much as came up. Analogy entered as follows: I argued that the so-called analogical argument for other minds doesn't work and that we do *not* know about the mental states of other persons by way of that argument. I also held that there is an analogy between our belief in God and our belief in other minds; both, I said, are rational or right or justifiably accepted even though there is no successful argument for either. How could Van Til confuse either of these things with the (false, as I see it) claim that we know God by analogical reasoning from the nature of human beings? Isn't that

like confusing a discussion of prime numbers with a discussion of prime ribs?

According to the second half of the sentence I quoted above, I "limit God to what is logically possible according to human understanding of the law of non-contradiction"; Van Til goes on to say that "What Plantinga presents here is a modern version of the old scholastic insistence that God's will is limited by his (more accurately man's) use of reason" (p. 32). I do think there are things God can't do; as the Scripture says he cannot lie or go back on his word; and I believe that he cannot sin. I also believe that he cannot create round squares, or married bachelors, or cause it to be the case that he both exists and does not. But it would be absurd to suppose that these "limitations of God's will" (if that's what you want to call them) are due to "man's use of reason." What God's will is limited by, if by anything, is not man's use of reason, but God's nature. It is because of his nature that God cannot lie or sin or create round squares. Now perhaps Van Til follows Descartes and Luther in supposing that God *can* do these things; if so, he and I have a real disagreement. But it is utterly misleading to suggest that my view, here, is that God's will is limited by man's use of reason.

Finally and most important: Van Til leaves the impression that I think "rational arguments" ought to be used "to arrive at foundational tenets for Christian thought" (p. 32, footnote 11); and immediately after discussing my "contribution" he says "A vacuous theism is hardly a substitute for Christianity and the claims of a crucified and risen Lord," as if I thought

Christians are or ought to be limited to a vacuous theism, perhaps because it is all "rational arguments" can establish.

Now perhaps Van Til did not mean to leave this impression. In any event, just to set the record straight, let me say clearly as I can what I do believe here. In the first place, I don't for a moment think Christians need "rational argument" to establish the fundamental tenets of Christianity; in *God and Other Minds* I argued that belief in God is entirely right, proper, rational and appropriate even though none of the proposed rational arguments succeeds. And in "Is Belief in God Rational?" (in *Rationality and Religious Belief*, ed. C. Delaney, 1979) I claimed that "the mature believer, the mature theist, does not typically accept belief in God tentatively, or until something better comes along, nor, I think, does he accept it as a conclusion from other things he believes; he accepts it as basic The mature theist *commits* himself to belief in God; this means that he accepts belief in God as basic" (p. 27). Secondly, I follow Calvin, Kuyper, Bavinck and the majority of Reformed thinkers in holding that belief in God *ought not* to be accepted on the basis of rational argument. As for "vacuous

theism," furthermore, I wouldn't dream of suggesting that Christians are or ought to be limited to such a thing. On the contrary; what I accept here and what I think Reformed Christians ought to accept is to be found in, say, the *Heidelberg Catechism*. And the fundamental tenets of Christianity to be found there, are to be established not by rational argument, but by appeal to the scriptures, wherein God speaks to us, revealing these and other truths. Of course I do think that serious thought and rigorous argument are useful to the Christian community; they are useful in exploring and expanding our understanding of the truths of Christianity and in defending them against the many sorts of attacks mounted against them. But here, I hope, Van Til and I are in agreement.

Van Til should be relieved to hear that I do not hold anything like the views he attributes to me. But how could he have thought I held them? Could it be that he didn't bother to read *God and Other Minds*, preferring instead to rely on brief comments in weekly news magazines for his information about it?

Alvin Plantinga

Reply to Plantinga

As some of the *Pro Rege* readers know, for several years Alvin Plantinga has devoted his ample capacities as a logician to a review and discussion of speculative theology or what may be called the rational arguments for the existence of God. In 1964 he contributed to *Faith and Philosophy* an article entitled "Necessary Being," which is the concern of one of the "Five Ways" of Thomas Aquinas. In 1965 Plantinga edited *The Ontological Argument* which

reviews the subject from its original statement by Anselm down to the present.

In his Oct. 29, 1980 *Pro Rege* letter, Plantinga refers to his 1967 publication, *God and Other Minds*. There he reviews the cosmological, the ontological, and the teleological arguments and finds them ineffective. He looks at the problem of evil and shows, as I referred to it also, that logic is not on the side of the "atheologist's" claim that the