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Can Van Til's Apologetics Transcend Cultures?:
Applying Van Tillian Apologetics
in the
Evangelism of Chinese Intellectuals

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Introduction

Can Cornelius Van Til's apologetics transcend cultures and be applied effectively to defend the Christian faith in Eastern cultures? The answer to this question is investigated in this paper in evangelistic work to Chinese intellectuals through the Pittsburgh Chinese Church of Oakland. The failures of the existing apologetical method are identified, and suggestions for reform through Van Til's presuppositional apologetics are discussed. To answer the question of whether Van Til's apologetics can transcend cultures, a contextualization of Van Til's apologetical method in debunking the worldview of Chinese intellectuals is presented.

The Chinese Worldview

In this paper, the term "Chinese intellectual" is narrowly defined as a Chinese native of the People's Republic of China who has a college education or higher. The worldview of a Chinese intellectual is difficult to describe; it is a confluence of Eastern and Western philosophies. Traditional Chinese philosophy and religious traditions based on Confucianism and Taoism have long been the ethos of the Chinese society. Although the teachings of Confucius were denigrated during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) brought on by Mao Zedōng, Confucianism has since made a comeback in mainstream Chinese culture.¹ Many Chinese intellectuals these days have a renewed interest in the humanistic teachings of Confucius as a philosophy of life.² Nevertheless, the influence of Western philosophies on the thought of Chinese intellectuals should not be underestimated. As a Communist country, western influence in the form of Marxism has seeped into Chinese minds for over half a century. Out of Marxism, atheism and scientific materialism have formed the main grids of modern Chinese thought.

¹ Ching-Ching Ni, "China Turns to Confucius, with a Modern Twist," *Los Angeles Times*, May 7, 2007, A1, A8.

² Pastor Hugo Cheng, interview by author, Pittsburgh, PA, January 17, 2008.

Postmodern philosophy has also influenced the younger generation of Chinese intellectuals, those who are in their 30s or younger.³ To summarize, the Chinese worldview places man as the ultimate authority. This worldview stands in direct antithesis to the Biblical worldview where God is the ultimate authority.

Evangelizing Chinese Intellectuals

As a way of investigating the applicability of presuppositional apologetics in evangelizing Chinese intellectuals, the author conducted interviews with three individuals from the Pittsburgh Chinese Church, Oakland (PCCO). The three individuals are Pastor Hugo Cheng, Dr. Peter Wu, and Dr. Yijen Wu. Collectively, they account for over thirty years of service to the Lord in evangelizing Chinese intellectuals. Pastor Hugo Cheng is the Senior Pastor at PCCO. Dr. Peter Wu is an elder, and Dr. Yijen Wu leads the evangelistic ministry.

At PCCO, it is recognized that the most important step in evangelizing Chinese intellectuals is building genuine relationships with them. Relationships with unbelieving Chinese intellectuals is important because social networks (*guān xi*) is an important facet of Chinese culture.⁴ The love of Christ expressed through such relationships within a loving church community meets the felt needs of Chinese intellectuals and stands as a powerful testament to the reality of Christ. This phenomenon of leveraging redemptive relationships for winning Chinese souls for Christ has also been observed elsewhere in the literature on evangelism of Chinese scholars.⁵

³ Ibid.

⁴ Katie Rawson, "Come Join the Family: Helping Chinese Scholars in the West Turn to God," in *Chinese Intellectuals and the Gospel*, ed. Samuel Ling (San Gabriel, CA: China Horizon, 1999), 159.

⁵ Ibid.

Apologetics Which Lacks The Punch

Given the emphasis which is made in building relationships with unbelievers, apologetics as it is practiced at PCCO is not considered to be an important factor in the conversion process of Chinese intellectuals. Frequently, unbelieving Chinese intellectuals come to faith when they face a personal crisis, and can turn to no one else but God.⁶ Objections to the Christian faith are usually expressed by those who are only casually interested in spiritual matters.⁷ The observation is that most of the apologetical questions which unbelieving Chinese intellectuals have are not “deep” questions, asked with a genuine interest.⁸ There are, however, deep philosophical, and theological issues which come to the surface when unbelieving Chinese intellectuals are closer to receiving Christ in their hearts.⁹ These issues are usually tied to their personal life experiences and present not only intellectual barriers to conversion, but also emotional barriers. Nonetheless, the consensus is that such issues present Christians with the challenge to provide sound Biblical counsel and are not occasions for intellectual sparring in apologetics.

Apologetics has thus failed to deliver its punch in the conversion process of Chinese intellectuals. When appropriately applied, apologetics can strike the mind of unbelieving intellectuals with jabs that expose the shaky foundation of their lives. Apologetics does not beget faith, but apologetics can provide hooks to an intellectual climate, whereby God can be seen as worthy of trust and commitment.¹⁰ This lack of apologetical thrust in the evangelism of Chinese intellectuals is examined next by looking at the prevailing apologetical method.

⁶ Pastor Hugo Cheng, Interview.

⁷ Dr. Yijun Wu, interview by author, Pittsburgh, PA, January 20, 2008.

⁸ Dr. Peter Wu, interview by author, Pittsburgh PA, January 20, 2008.

⁹ Y. Wu, Interview.

¹⁰ Alister E. McGrath, *Intellectuals Don't Need God and Other Modern Myths: Building Bridges to Faith Through Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993), 52.

The Prevailing Apologetical Method

From the interview discussions with Pastor Hugo Cheng, the prevailing apologetical method employed can best be categorized as classical or evidentialist apologetics. In such an approach, evidences are presented to unbelieving individuals to establish truths about God. Implicitly, such an apologetical method presupposes a common ground between the secular rationality of the autonomous man and the Christian's rationality.¹¹ Popular Chinese apologetics literature, such as Li Chéng's *Song of a Wanderer: Beckoned by Eternity*, is an example of classical apologetics. In Li Chéng's book, the unregenerated mind of the unbeliever is presented with scientific evidences and historical facts which demonstrate the strong likelihood of the authenticity of the Christian faith.

Another variant of evidentialist apologetics takes a culturally-sensitive approach by interpreting the history of China from a Christian perspective, with the purpose of authenticating God's existence in the history and culture of China. A well-known proponent of such an apologetical method is the Chinese evangelist, Yuan Zhiming. His unorthodox approach to apologetics has been described as poetic, aesthetic, and mystical.¹²

Reasons For Apologetical Failure

The apologetical methods described in the previous section had worked well in evangelistic work with the older generation of Chinese intellectuals.¹³ However, this effectiveness has gradually waned over the years. A decade or more ago, Chinese intellectuals were more receptive to arguments which show that the existence of God is highly probable.¹⁴ Times have

¹¹ McGrath, *Intellectuals Don't Need God and Other Modern Myths*, 56.

¹² Samuel Ling, "Charting Two Critical Maps for PRC Ministry," in *Chinese Intellectuals and the Gospel*, ed. Samuel Ling (San Gabriel, CA: China Horizon, 1999), 151-152.

¹³ Hugo Cheng, Interview.

¹⁴ Y. Wu, Interview.

changed. The younger generation of Chinese intellectuals may claim that they believe in scientific certainty, but their minds are also tainted with relativism from the influence of postmodern philosophy. To postmoderns, evidences do not carry much weight, because truth itself is inconsequential. To the postmodern Chinese intellectual, there are no universal truths.¹⁵ All truths are fashioned from multiple constraints.¹⁶ Truths are merely beliefs created to help them contend with difficulties in the world in which they live.¹⁷ With such an outlook on truth claims, Chinese intellectuals are like other postmoderns: they are well-adept in incoherence and groundlessness. Furthermore, the postmodern influence on Chinese intellectuals also render them neither longing for meaning nor having any inclination for absolutes. Postmodern presuppositions must be confronted if apologetics is to gain any ground in dialogues with Chinese intellectuals.

As mentioned earlier, the Chinese worldview is also influenced by Confucianism. In Confucius' teachings, man by nature is good.¹⁸ Moral failures can be eradicated by education and moral cultivation. This aspect of Confucianism and its stronghold on the Chinese culture is evident in the fact that the word "sin" as described in the Bible has no equivalent in the Chinese language. The word "sin" is translated by the Chinese calligraphic character "tzuì" which in normal usage means "felony". Without uprooting presuppositions which stems from Confucianism, any apologetical method which attempts to find common ground in the rational

¹⁵ Jon Hinkson and Greg Ganssle, "Epistemology At the Core of Postmodernism: Rorty, Foucault, and the Gospel", in *The Telling Truth: Evangelizing Postmoderns*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 85.

¹⁶ Ibid, 80.

¹⁷ Ibid, 72.

¹⁸ Lit-Sen Chang, *Asia's Religions: Christianity Momentous Encounter With Paganism* (San Gabriel, CA: China Horizon, 1999), 44.

thinking of the unbelieving Chinese intellectual will end up fighting an uphill task when arguing for the necessity of redemption.

Another reason postulated for the failure of apologetics is the commonly held view that religion has only functional roles in society.¹⁹ Religion is recognized to have psychological, cultural, and moral functions. However, the transcendent nature of religion is reduced to superstition and is declared as irrelevant to scientific minds. Chinese intellectuals with this kind of presupposition about religion do not believe in the transcendent and have little interest in any defense of the Christian faith.

Proverbs 26:4 tells us, “Do not answer a fool according to his folly or you will be like him yourself.” From our discussion above, clearly, for apologetics to be effective in evangelizing Chinese intellectuals, the apologetical approach must not attempt to reason without first whittling away at the presuppositions of the Chinese worldview. Therefore, reform of the apologetical method must take place.

Reforming Apologetics

To reform the apologetics approach, one must begin by asking what it is that we believe. As described by Van Til, apologetics is a “defense of the system of truth presented in Scriptures.”²⁰ God has authority over all things, including man’s reasoning and man’s religious argumentation. Greg Bahnsen summed up Van Til’s thoughts on the relationship between theology and apologetics succinctly: “Theology must guide apologetics.”²¹ It becomes a necessary step then for PCCO to rethink how theology and apologetics are taught to the church. Apologetics should not

¹⁹ Pilgrim W. K. Lo, “Theology is Not Mere Sociology: A Theological Reflection on the Reception of the Christian Religion in Mainland China,” *Dialog* 43, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 160.

²⁰ Cornelius Van Til, *Defense of The Faith*, 3rd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1967), 7.

²¹ Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic: Reading and Analysis*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1998), 534.

be viewed as a separate field, but must be viewed as part of the whole theology that the church upholds.

The major shortcoming of the apologetical approach practiced at PCCO is its failure to confront the Chinese worldview. In antithesis to the Biblical worldview, man is presupposed as the ultimate reference of knowledge. If this epistemological fallacy is not addressed, any theistic evidence will be rejected, since unbelievers stand in opposition to God and desire to suppress their knowledge of God (Romans 1:19-22). The Biblical approach which addresses the epistemological failure of unbelief is the transcendental, presuppositional approach attributed to Cornelius Van Til. In literature surveyed on the topic of Van Til's presuppositional apologetics, not much has been written regarding the applicability of Van Tillian apologetics in the context of Eastern cultures. Bahnsen asserted that Van Til's presuppositional apologetics can be applied in defending the Christian faith against other religious faiths.²² Jeff Downs also affirmed the Biblical basis of Van Tillian apologetics in the context of cults and world religions, but, as in Bahnsen's work, he too, omitted any detailed discussion of the apologetical procedures to be used.²³ In what follows, Van Til's presuppositional apologetical method is briefly described, and a contextualization of this approach is applied to debunk the worldview of Chinese intellectuals.

Van Til's Presuppositional Apologetics

Presuppositions are the basic convictions which determine how a person lives and how he

²² Greg L. Bahnsen, "Presuppositional Reasoning With False Faiths," *Penpoint* 7, no. 2 (February/March 1996), 1.

²³ Jeff Downs, "Approaching Cults and World Religions from a Presuppositional Apologetic Perspective" (paper presented at the annual Eastern Regional conference of the Evangelical Theological Society, St. David's, PA, March 26, 2004).

uses his mind.²⁴ There are two aspects to Van Til's presuppositional apologetics. First, it requires all arguments presented by the apologist to be transcendental, by presupposing that the Triune God of the Bible exist and the Bible is His inerrant Word. Answering an unbeliever on his own misguided presuppositions will render the apologetics ineffective. In Bahnsen's word, the apologist will lose "the battle from the outset, constantly trapped behind enemy lines."²⁵ Second, presuppositional apologetics exposes the epistemological failure of the unbeliever's presuppositions. According to Van Til, "the natural man must be blasted out of his hideouts, his caves, his last lurking places ..."²⁶ It is only the "atomic energy of a truly Reformed methodology that can explode the last Festung (fortress)" of the natural man.²⁷ The unbeliever must be shown the folly of his presuppositions, which when pursued to their consistent end, render the unbeliever's "reasoning vacuous and his experience unintelligible; in short, they lead to the destruction of knowledge, the dead-end of epistemological futility, to utter foolishness."²⁸ Richard Pratt describes this approach as a twofold justification framed with arguments by truth and arguments by folly.²⁹

To contextualize this approach in evangelistic work to Chinese intellectuals, the strongholds of the Chinese worldview must be chiseled down. To see how Van Til's presuppositional method is applied to debunk the worldview of Chinese intellectuals, the discussion will be constrained to

²⁴ Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic: Reading and Analysis*, 461.

²⁵ Greg L. Bahnsen, *Always Ready: Directions for Defending The Faith*, ed. Robert R. Booth (Texarkana, AR: Covenant Media Foundation, 1996), 61.

²⁶ Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 2nd ed., ed. William Edgar (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2003), 135.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Bahnsen, *Always Ready: Directions for Defending The Faith*, 62.

²⁹ Richard L. Pratt Jr., *Every Thought Captive: A Study Manual For the Defense of Christian Faith*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1979), 85-97.

two topics. First, the presupposition that will be debunked is the idea that scientific certainty is the foundation for everything. Second, the Confucian influence in the way Chinese intellectuals view humanity and morality will be confronted.

Debunking The Chinese Worldview

Chinese intellectuals presuppose that scientific certainty is the foundation of everything. Questions must be formed to expose the epistemological inadequacy of the presupposition, in order to reduce this presupposition to uncertainty. Arguments can be constructed as follows: first, challenge the assumption that scientific explanations are true. If the claim is that scientific explanations are rational and logical, what is the basis for rational thought? How can one know that logic is true? What is the relationship between the universe and logic? What certainty is there, that everyone's understanding of logic is the same? Can anyone lay claim to analytical knowledge of all possibilities? If the answer is no, how can one know that logic or science can lead to truth claims?³⁰

Second, science relies on the uniformity of nature, that past experiments can be repeated to predict future results. Why is the uniformity of nature true? What governs and imposes the uniformity in nature?

Third, how can one know with scientific certainty that there is no God? If someone rejects the existence of God without scientific certainty, confront the person, with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15). Rejection of God without scientific certainty is inconsistent with the presupposition of science as the foundation of all truths.

Fourth, if the foundation of everything can be explained with science, are emotions such as love reduced to just synaptic, cerebral, electrochemical reactions? If the answer is in the

³⁰ Van Til, *The Defense of The Faith*, 216-218.

affirmative, can the unbeliever live without love? Can the unbeliever reject all desires to be loved?

In the Biblical worldview, scientific knowledge is not the foundation of all truths, but the epistemological certainty of science can be explained in the following way. First, scientific certainty is based on the presupposition of the ontological trinity.³¹ Scientific facts are true because we presuppose the one true God who is the source of all knowledge, including scientific knowledge.

Second, scientific certainty is a psychological phenomena of human experiences gained from interacting with the created world of a Creator God.³² We are created in God's image (Genesis 1:26-27). We are created to think God's thoughts after Him. Science is the discovery of God's true knowledge of the world He created. Scientific laws and the uniformity of nature exist because God created those laws and upholds the uniformity of the nature of the world He created.

Third, to the unbeliever, logic has no a priori, and he cannot account for why logic is true. In the Biblical worldview, logic is true and comes into existence not in man's mind, but logic existed prior to the thoughts of man and the creation of man. Logic comes from God's mind. God is rational, and because He created man in His image, man is capable of thinking rationally and logically like God.³³

Another presupposition that has to be stripped down is the teachings of Confucius on humanity and morality. According to Confucius, man is good and has no need of the redemptive work of a Savior. Furthermore, morality without deity is presupposed in

³¹ Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace* (1947; repr., Philadelphia: PA, P & R Publishing, 1954) 50.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Van Til, *The Defense of The Faith*, 216-218.

Confucianism. Arguments to reduce these presuppositions to folly is as follows: first, press the unbeliever to give an epistemological account for their belief that man is good. How does one know that Confucius was right? Why are his words authoritative? The description of man provided by Confucius cannot be vindicated. The empirical data of man's nature around the world show that man is not good, but is desperately wicked.

Second, how can one account for evil? How can one account for the wickedness of man if man is presupposed to be naturally good? Confucianism suggests man becomes wicked because of his ignorance. According to Confucius, man can be reformed by education and cultivation of morals. Nonetheless, empirical data shows that educated men are still desperately wicked. Moral restraints cannot change a wicked heart.

Third, the strong belief and hope in humanity has sent many Chinese intellectuals searching for moral heroes. Former Premiers of China, Zhou EnLai and Hu JingTao, are not only national heroes, but in the minds of some Chinese intellectuals, Zhou EnLai and Hu JingTao are deified as moral heroes. Question the unbeliever's notion of good. What are the standards for judging? Where do those standards come from? How do they know those standards are true? What is the basis for morality? By whose authority is it given? How can one know everything there is to know about morality? Press the Chinese intellectuals whom you are speaking to by confronting them on the epistemological inadequacy of their worldview on morality. Confucius' teachings cannot provide an account for why there is standard for good and evil.

Present to Chinese intellectuals the Biblical account for humanity and morality. The arguments by God's truth can be presented in the following manner: first, man is not good by nature but is corrupted by sin (Romans 3:23). On this truth, the Christian worldview can account for man's sin nature and his disposition to wickedness.

Second, humanists claim that morality is the most basic impulse of man, but they cannot give an adequate account for how they know that is true. Any standards of morality without the Christian God lack authority. The Biblical worldview holds that we have an authoritative standard for good and evil because of the absoluteness of morality in God. Unbelievers have notions of good and evil because they too, as creatures created in the image of God, possess an innate knowledge of God, but have chosen to suppress their knowledge of God (Romans 1:19-22). The apologist must press this anknüpfungspunkt (point of contact) with the unbeliever and use it to open up more dialogues for the message of the gospel to be shared.

Third, Chinese intellectuals who are searching for moral heroes must be pointed to the cross of Calvary. The ultimate moral hero in humanity is God Himself, incarnated as the Man, Jesus Christ, who died for our sins so that we can be redeemed into relationship with our Creator God (Romans 5:8).

Conclusion

Evangelizing Chinese intellectuals requires cultivation of relationships. In an effort to build these relationships, often times, apologetics is set aside in order to avoid confrontation. Nevertheless, Scriptures tells us to redeem the time that God has given us, because the days are evil (Ephesians 5:16). The evangelism of Chinese intellectuals must embrace a greater sense of urgency. Apologetics must not be delayed, but employed to tear down every stronghold in the Chinese worldview which stands against Christ. Van Tillian apologetics is a transcultural, Biblical approach which can rise to the challenge of effectively defending the Christian faith. The Festung of the Chinese mind must be demolished and every thought taken captive for Christ.

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