

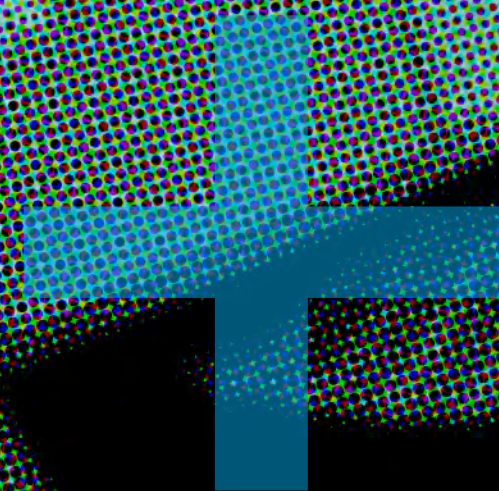
ISSUES

IN CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

Summer 2013

Vol. 46, No. 3

THE ROLE OF Apologetics IN THE Church's Mission



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IN CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

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The Role of Apologetics in the Church's Mission

3 Reflections

Rev. Dr. Brian L. Friedrich, President

4 Editorials

8 Attacks on the Christian Faith: Who, What, Why?

Dr. Joel Okamoto

17 Apologetics in a University Context

Dr. Paul L. Maier

23 Adolescents and Apologetics: Two Inventories

Dr. Russ Moulds

30 Positive Apologetics

Dr. Adam Francisco

36 Book Reviews

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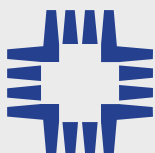
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As I reflect on the articles, editorials and book reviews in this edition of *Issues in Christian Education*, I am also thinking about my list of summer home projects. Both the neighbor across the street and the neighbor adjacent to our home are master home project completers. By vocation, one is a retired contractor and the other is a dentist. I admire the easy and calm way in which they complete projects. In assessing my performance relative to theirs, I don't measure up very well. Simply put, they have more tools in their kits. They literally have more tools, but they also have tools of aptitude and experience which I lack in most home projects.

This edition of *Issues*, "The Role of Apologetics in the Church's Mission," provides a wonderful opportunity to increase the quality and quantity of tools in our missional tool kits. It is designed to assist God's people who desire to engage post-moderns of every age through the use of apologetics as they carefully and winsomely articulate the faith in Jesus Christ that fills them.

The following tweet-like quotes are an attempt to draw you into the depth and wealth of this edition:

"The practice of apologetics is an exercise in contending for the truth of the Christian faith in the context of our current culture." (Reek)

"Bizarre as it may seem, there is a computer blog at: Jesusneverexisted.com." (Maier)

"Most nonbelievers, for example, have a nagging sense that all is not right with the world." (Bachmann)

"But for a world that largely and increasingly sees Christianity as a first-century myth perpetuated by the remnant of traditional western culture, apologetics works towards demonstrating that what we confess is not a cleverly or culturally disguised myth, but it is in fact what God himself did in real historical time and space for us and for the world." (Francisco)

"Every time is always the time to be engaging young people, formally or informally, in the apologetics topics." (Moulds)

"[Dawkins] has famously said that religious beliefs and upbringing are child abuse, and that they could be worse than sexual abuse." (Okamoto)

God inspired St. Peter to write: "...if someone asks about your Christian hope, always be ready to explain it" (1 Peter 3:15b NLT). I pray that this edition will bolster your most important tool kit and aid you as you witness and proclaim the changeless Christ in an ever-changing world!

BRIAN L. FRIEDRICH, PRESIDENT

A Heart for Apologetics

Classical rhetoric offers Christians powerful tools from God's left-hand kingdom for apologetic work. Aristotle describes rhetoric as the discovery and use of "in any given case the available means of persuasion." [*Rhetoric*, Book I, Ch.2) Rhetoric is above all a preparation tool—a spade to ready the heart for the Gospel—not a bludgeoning club. I take the work of apologetics at its broadest to include all responsible persuasion strategies that help lead people to Christ and that help nurture Christians in faith for the long haul.

In each generation, we Christians need to sharpen our trowels, spades, and pruning shears to learn how to share the faith. We need to discover the best times and smartest ways to sow seed by which the Holy Spirit changes hearts and grows the Body of Christ.

One of the tools in the shed of classical rhetoric is the **enthymeme**, sometimes called argument sketch—a shorthand argument that says just enough but not too much. Etymologically, enthymeme has the Greek *enthymesthai*, "to consider or take to heart" at its center. I think the Luther rose is a great reminder of the enthymeme as a rhetorical strategy, with the cross and heart at the center of the universe. An enthymeme captures the heart of any argument but doesn't belabor. Enthymematic messages need to be aptly worded and compressed so that a listener can successfully unfold them. An enthymematic message-shaper needs wisdom, finesse and good timing. Aristotle praises the enthymeme's power saying that enthymemes "excite the louder applause."

Consider an illustration I use in my teaching to set up the shared discovery that goes on in argument sketches: Look at the sequence of line drawings and tell me when you get it. I'm putting typical student responses in brackets.

First drawing: Draw a largish circle [a circle, a world, a clock face ... ?]

Second drawing: Draw a slightly smaller circle on it [an 8? a snowman? an earring ... ?]

Third drawing: Make the bottom O a Q with a curvy tail [a molecule or bacteria? ... a fancy earring?]

Fourth drawing: Put 2 inverted v's on the top circle and 2 inverted v's for eyes [some animal? ... squirrel?]

Fifth drawing: Add a v for a nose and 6 longish whiskers: [a cat!]

Soon everyone has an "aha" moment: a cat. This cat is not complete with fur, claws, and purrs. People enjoy filling in the blanks of puzzles, riddles, mysteries; shared discovery creates bonds. Shorthand or suggestive sketches should be in the apologist's tool kit, even when the topic is not frivolous, but important, as apologetic work is. Giving others the opportunity of filling in the blanks shows respect for others.

A key to effective apologetic argument is keeping in mind the audience and purpose for the message. Aristotle again: In order to be a good persuader, one must be a studier of all manner of men [people] (*Rhetoric* Book I, Ch. 8). Arguments are, of course, not quarrels. "Argument" is a line of reasoning that provides reasons (premises) that point to a believable conclusion. My favorite quote to put in a college syllabus comes from G. K. Chesterton: "People generally quarrel because they do not know how to argue."

The more we know a person, the less we need to say to elicit good co-discovery moments. Enthymemes may successfully hide a conclusion, or they may leave as background some of the reasons. For example, most married couples can signal reasons and conclusions in shorthand: On a Saturday my husband is watching a *second* football game. I raise my eyebrow, conveying the conclusion: you should help me clean the garage. The reasons are unspoken but tacitly understood—you've watched enough football, and the garage needs it.

If, however, we do not know our colleagues well, we need sustained, sensitive tilling of the ground to communicate Christ.



The apologetic task may involve trying to influence people with whom we have serious disagreement. It takes time and patience to till hard ground around people outside our churches who have misconceptions or have been bludgeoned before: bad vibes from other overbearing church people, wrong-headed cults, controlling family members.

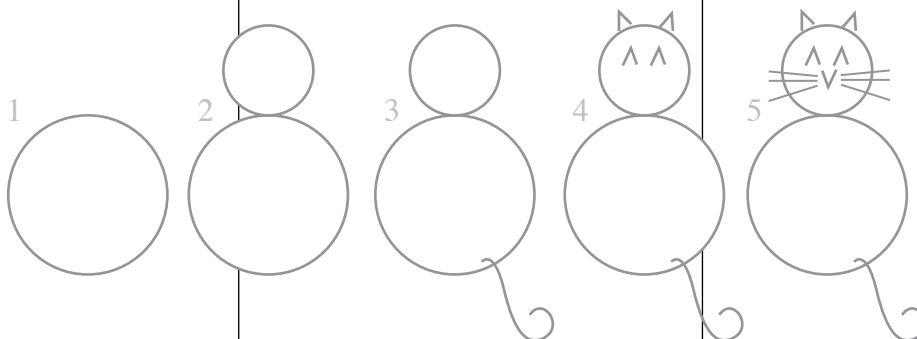
Pray to gauge the need, and pray for a sense of humor! Wise Christian apologists employ enthymematic strategies in two ways: **Attracting attention**, on the one hand, and **Keeping attention**, on the other.

1) Attracting Attention: Let Others Be Co-Creators of Lines of Thought. Enthymemes get people's attention, first, by evidencing a caring "heart" for the listener and by dialog in an area of mutual recognition. Discovering common ground begins to grow the Body of Christ.

In *Acts 17*, St. Paul illustrates positively the attention-getting aspect of enthymematic persuasion. He takes sufficient time in Athens to discover what is on the mind of typical pagans. He makes a connection by way of their shrine to an "unknown god" and by reference to one of their poets. Our Lutheran Law/Gospel understanding of how God's Word addresses us can help us look for contemporary ways to connect with our audiences.

Most nonbelievers, for example, have a nagging sense that all is not right with the world. Use of enthymemes concerning the human plight can let them engage the conversation with their own accounts of what's going wrong. We can secure their attention and sustain it if they sense we are profoundly engaged with analysis of what's wrong. We need to know when to stop speaking, but also when to be explicit and dig deeper to clear up misconceptions.

2) Keeping Attention: Let the Holy Spirit Shape Us Artfully to Conceal and Reveal. The more difficult part of the apologetic task is moving from analysis of



Can Apologetics Serve Teaching and Preaching?

the problem, Law, toward preparing people for the Gospel. Sowing Gospel seeds well requires a gentle touch, the life-giving Holy Spirit remarkably using us to meet the other. As Christ came as a person, the best apologetic argument is a Word-filled relationship, a promise to “walk with,” not a treatise.

Still, faith has cognitive components we can engage. For some, the linguistic power of hymns awakens the impulse to deepen faith. Vigorous exposure to the strength and humorous foibles of the disciples can be intriguing and used to good effect. Sharing a well-chosen film or classic literary work revealing how evil prowls abroad in the land—perhaps C. S. Lewis or J.R.R. Tolkien—can open space for faith. An invitation to “help,” e.g., rhetoric of inclusion, is effective: “We sure could use you to ... play second base on the church team; sing tenor; count the offering; serve coffee.” Such inclusion needs to be part of our apologetic ministries to those already in as well as to those outside our faith.

The enthymeme offers a persuasion strategy that artfully conceals and reveals the Gospel to build the Church. The example of St. Paul cautions us not to be over-prideful in tallying our conversions. In Athens, St. Paul forthrightly witnessed to Jesus; yet he was frustrated when, although at first attracted, the locals did not persevere and said “perhaps another day.” St. Paul didn’t have satisfaction that day, but we know that one plants; another harvests (1 Corinthians 3:5-7). Eventually, the Spirit prevailed in various cities in Greece and throughout the world because the Church certainly did and does continue to grow.

Enthymemes work with indirection and set up a give/take dynamic with others. God’s eternal truths are being conveyed, but not in hard-sell style. Faith and God’s kingdom will come, as the catechism reminds us, even without our prayer for it, but we pray we may be tools in and for God’s coming kingdom.

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In 1951 Reinhold Niebuhr published his important taxonomy, *Christ and Culture*. This classic work serves as a valuable framework to discuss the range of ways that the Church has sought to assert the Gospel in the unique settings of its history.¹ To no small degree these assertions have been a reflection of the Church’s apologetic efforts. Even a cursory review of Niebuhr’s text provides some of those “Ah-ha” moments of clarity, for the reader is provided a sense of classification, a structure of understanding. Everyday examples of each classification can be drawn from sermons, Bible classes, public pronouncements, and political activity of the Church to highlight and clarify the nuances Niebuhr observed in his work.

Why does one church body at some point in history assail the theater as godless and another subsequently makes use of both the form and setting of the theater to foster the faith? Why will one group of Christians eschew involvement in the public forum and another believes such involvement is precisely its calling? Each is interpreting and applying the faith to its setting in time, defending its convictions and asserting its message. Each is practicing apologetics at least in a broad sense.

The practice of apologetics is an exercise in contending for the truth of the Christian faith in the context of our current culture. Steven B. Cowan makes that clear in his introduction to *Five Views on Apologetics*:

... apologetics has to do with defending, or making a case for, the truth of the Christian faith. It is an intellectual discipline that is usually said to serve at least two purposes: (1) to bolster the faith of Christian believers, and (2) to aid in the task of evangelism.²

Cowan’s definition of apologetics serves as a generally acceptable description of the task. At the same time it serves to begin to specify some of the differences and difficulties in our present intellectual climate, for central to his definition is the aggravating word

“truth.” Hence the work of this issue of *Issues in Christian Education*!

Back to Niebuhr! One could readily glean from the annals of church history and church debates myriad examples of relatively minor (Can we use the word “neutral”?) questions about engagement with or avoidance of the accouterments of culture. For example, older generations of the Missouri Synod will remember John H.C. Fritz’s *Pastoral Theology* encouraging congregations to invest in an automobile for the pastor to make visits. *A Man Spoke! A World Listened!* recounts Rev. Dr. Walter A. Maier’s struggles against cultural opinion to make use of radio to communicate the Gospel. In the retrospect of history, these are relatively straightforward matters, almost surprising in the amount of heat and light they generated.

But what do we make of the engagement with culture when it goes to the level of philosophies of the time, for that is precisely where apologetics takes place? That’s well beyond the scope of neutral; for philosophies go to the heartbeat of a culture; and philosophies are never neutral; and cultures are always under the power of sin. Philosophies are anything but neutral; for the questions and debates of both philosophy and theology shape and reflect the human experience as well as the human condition and human culture. The questions and debates of philosophies sometimes run parallel to the promises and concerns of the Christian faith, sometimes run against it in antagonism, sometimes away from it in skepticism. The two disciplines have at their core many of the same questions from entirely different perspectives. Philosophy gives voice to the questions of humanity that the faith seeks to answer in promise.

To what degree is it necessary for the faith to be shaped in terms of the philosophy of the moment if it is to be a voice that speaks to the questions being asked? To what degree does the prevailing philosophy dictate the

constructs within which the message can be heard? And to what degree does any and every philosophy leave its stamp on the faith in such a way as to change the character of the theology and the promise of the Gospel? (Here consider St. Augustine's engagement with Neo-Platonism and the enmeshment of St. Thomas Aquinas with Aristotle.) There are no neutral philosophies; neither are there any distinctly Christian philosophies. Because apologetics undertakes its task precisely in this milieu, it is caught by its own design and intent.

C.S. Lewis caught something of this in his work *Perelandra*:

I interrupted him. "To tell you the truth, Ransom," I said, "I'm getting more worried every day about the whole business. It came into my head as I was on my way here—"Oh, they'll put all sorts of things into your head if you let them," said Ransom lightly. "The best plan is to take no notice and keep straight on. Don't try to answer them. They like drawing you into an interminable argument."³

Nevertheless, we are about it; and should be. Peter argues that in his first letter:

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have (1 Peter 3:15, NIV). The challenge lies in these days to pick the philosophical framework most amenable to the Gospel; and we are back to Niebuhr! Are we to be antagonists of culture? Compatriots? Lords of it?

Current reading in apologetics suggests that there are three broad apologetic approaches or families setting about the clear communication of the faith. Those three general families include the classic or traditional approach with a commitment to foundationalism and corresponding truth, the approach of Reformed epistemology that argues for faith in God to be a warranted

foundation for which proof is not necessary, and the postmodern approach that wouldn't really want to be classed as an apologetic method at all but surely quacks like a duck. These three approaches would seem to part company in at least two ways: 1. They understand truth differently, including having distinct assumptions about reason's capacity to grasp truth, especially in our limited experience. 2. They treat differently the role of Scripture in the process of knowing. 3. Each of these three approaches to apologetics is inextricably wed to particularly different philosophical convictions and techniques; for the questions and issues of philosophy are inseparable from being human and in culture.

While there are a host of names that make some of these discussions popular, the serious writers are less recognizable but worth the work to engage them. And it is work. Important among the classical authors are Douglas Groothuis, Richard Swinburne, William Lane Craig, Gary Habermas, John Frame, Kelly Clark, Millard Erickson, and Paul Feinberg. Significant for the Reformed epistemological line of thinking are Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff.

Important for the voice of postmodernism are Merold Westphal, Stanley Grenz, John Franke, Nancey Murphy, John Caputo, and Jean Luc-Marion. For the task of explicating and/or defending the Christian faith especially out of a Lutheran ethos, each of these approaches has its problems, each has value. The jury is still out. None of them is meritless. Each is an element of thinking in a human culture that Christ has redeemed. They are valuable to that extent; but they are limited apart from Christ ... and sometimes on the basis of their own merits or assumptions.

For Lutheran thinkers faith is created and sustained by the preached and sacramented Word. But what does that faith look and

sound like? To what degree is it specified by the enunciation of specific language to evidence believing? (An impossibility for the infant and the comatose!) The tasks of teaching and preaching don't happen in a vacuum; they happen now as they always have in a human culture, with human history, human language, and human thought patterns. The means of grace create and sustain faith, not reason. But the communication must be reasoned and reasonable to be understood. The communication must be reasoned and reasonable precisely because ultimately the questions of philosophy reflect the limitations of humanity in its weak and broken condition; and although there are themes of mysticism in our history, that has never been our central focus. The alternative is an invitation to Dame Reason to serve in the task. Madame Reason, however, has such a way of taking over the household until she holds sway. If there is an appeal or challenge in this editorial at all, it is the invitation to engage the double task of communicating the faith in a hostile environment and the serious self-scrutiny that is involved in the engagement. The task is formidable and remarkably fruitful in the same breath.

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Notes

- 1 For a recent discussion and constructive critique of Niebuhr's five options, see *Christ and Culture Revisited*, D.A. Carson, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008.
- 2 *Five Views on Apologetics*, Steven B. Cowan, editor, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000, 8.
- 3 C.S. Lewis, *Perelandra*, New York: Charles Scribner, 1944, 20.

Calling All Catechists: Apologetics and World View Training Needed

When I first became a campus pastor nearly 15 years ago, I was concerned that our impressionable youth would not be ready for the massive jolt that they would receive when they stepped out of the local high school cafeteria and into the collegiate academic square. Would they remain in the faith? Would they be able to prepare for life lived “in” the university, but not “of” the university?

I still have these concerns. Yet, I also have new and bigger ones. In short, I don’t believe we can afford the luxury of trying to keep our young people in the faith when they step onto the college campus—the fight is on to keep them in the faith “before” they arrive.

In addition to navigating the waters of independence, testing social boundaries, and making vocational decisions, the typical college student must do so without the foundational familial and churchly anchors of his or her pre-college life, and in a context increasingly antagonistic to Christian faith. Moreover, like unto Athens of Acts 17, the secular university is also a place permeated with religion. It is not a matter of there being religion on campus, but what religion it is. The Gospel that is assumed is the Gospel denied!

Most secular universities still have stately stone buildings chiseled with Latin phrases calling on mankind to pursue truth. Yet the great, great-grandchildren of those stonemasons are more concerned with the legalization of pot than they are about that which is beautiful, noble or true.

Pilate’s age old question, “What is truth?” (John 18:38) still reigns supreme, but the days where academics pursued actual truth are increasingly numbered. Today the question *du jour* is not “What is truth?” but “Why should we even care about truth?”

It is increasingly rare that our Lutheran youth show up for college equipped for what they will face on today’s pluralistic and post-modern campus. While the quad has always been an incubator of secular ideology and activism, the seeds are germinating

much earlier. The world doesn’t wait to indoctrinate our youth until college. We can’t wait to prepare them for what they will face there.

While the parents of today’s college freshmen may have had their faith challenged in the science classroom with evolutionary theory, today it is not only the hard sciences that are our concern. Today students are increasingly more likely to have the foundations of their worldview assaulted in English, Theatre or Psychology class. No classroom can be assumed safe.

The catechization of our youth must take place earlier, it must be stronger, and it needs to include, or be followed up with, some rather serious boot camp type preparation for the apologetic task. Our youth must be able to recite the catechism and confess its truths with great vigor, but they also must be prepared to face criticisms and common objections for having any faith at all.

The roots of today’s secular progressive thinking are deep and wide. The impact is all the more pronounced because of the reach of the new social media. By the time today’s young Lutherans step on to the college campus, they have already been subjected to the effects of today’s university education on their parents, and the secular propaganda of today’s public schools. Simply put, they are no longer “shocked” when they arrive on campus. They are veterans who in many cases have survived without all the weapons necessary to defend their faith.

So what does the church do? How do we respond? Those of us in campus ministry will do our part, but we cannot do so alone. Campus ministry doesn’t begin when young people step onto a college campus and a local campus worker tries to track them down and invite them to church or other activities. Campus ministry must be owned by the entire church.

Typical college students today realize that they need more catechetical training so that they have something to articulate when they

are confronted by a professor who is hostile to their faith, or when they try express their faith to their friends. They know they need to say something, but they aren’t sure what to say or how to say it. The task is made harder when those they seek to witness to have been equally subjected to pervasive anti-Christian and anti-truth worldviews.

We must teach our young people the substance of the faith, but we also must teach them to be able to think, process what they learn, and critically engage those around them. Our Lutheran youth instinctively know that, to paraphrase I Peter 3:15, they need to be prepared to make a defense [an “apology”] to anyone who asks them for a reason for the hope that is in them. As college students they have countless opportunities before them. But it’s one thing to *know* what we have been called to do. It is another to know *how* to do it.

Mirroring the secular educational models of the day will not do, nor will youth ministry models that are concerned most with simply helping young people have fun in a safe Christian context. It is absolutely critical that we equip our young people to be able to think before they can speak, and when they speak they must have something to say. There is no replacement for catechetical formation, but they must also be armed to be able to articulately discuss and answer questions unbelievers have about the existence of God, the reliability of the Old and New Testaments, and the problem of evil.

The worldview challenges that our youth face on the college campus are legion, but the opportunities are equally endless. It is time to raise up a generation of confessors of the faith in the public square. While apologetics is not the only answer, it is time for it to be viewed as a needed complement to our catechetical and vocational training of our youth. If we are up to the task, we might just find by God’s grace that we will not only keep our young people in the faith during their college years, but they will be strengthened as confessors of the faith for life.

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Attacks on the Christian Faith: Who, What, Why?

A recent issue of *National Geographic* pictured a young Indian man with a scar on his thigh, an enduring sign of “the eight-hour beating he endured for refusing to renounce his Christian faith when Hindu extremists attacked his village in 2008.” The photograph is just one current reminder that followers of Jesus Christ have had to follow him in enduring rejection and suffering. Sometimes, the cost has been life itself, just as it was for the Lord. At other times, the cost has been family, home, or liberty.

Compared to other places and other times, life for us Christians in the United States usually has been free from such attacks and such costs. We aren’t being rounded up and shot. We aren’t being driven from our homes and placed in internment camps or sent into exile. Our children aren’t being taken from us and raised to despise their parents. Our businesses aren’t being taken over by greedy neighbors and jealous competitors.

But American Christians do come under other kinds of attack. They are certainly far less painful than overt persecution. However, we sometimes find that we and our story, beliefs, teachings, practices, and institutions are regarded not only with puzzlement and amusement, but also with open suspicion, disdain, and hostility.

It is easy to come across examples of these attacks—so easy that I did not have to search for a current example. One came in the wake of a family’s tragedy.

The family is that of Rick and Kay Warren, and the tragedy was the suicide of their son, Matthew. Pastor Rick Warren, the best-known name in American evangelism after Rev. Billy Graham, lost his 27-year-old son, Matthew, to suicide on Friday (April 5).

In the days since, uncounted strangers have joined the 20,000 congregants who worship at the megachurch network “Pastor Rick” built in Southern California, Warren’s nearly 1 million Twitter followers and hundreds of thousands of Face book followers in flooding social media with consolation and prayer.

“Kay and I are overwhelmed by your love, prayers, and kind words,” Warren tweeted on Sunday. “You are all encouraging our ... broken hearts.”

But a shocking number are taking the moment of media attention to lash out at Warren on their digital tom-toms. The attacks are aimed both at him personally and at his Christian message.

Some unbelievers want to assure Rick and Kay Warren, his wife and Matthew’s bereaved mother, that there’s no heaven where they’ll meet their son again.

“Either there is no God, or God doesn’t listen to Rick Warren, despite all the money Rick has made off of selling false hope to desperate people,” one poster from Cincinnati wrote in to *USA Today*.

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In another comment, the same poster counsels Warren to “abandon primitive superstitions and accept the universe for what it is—a place that is utterly indifferent to us.”

Some rush to add pain to the Warrens’ world because, in their view, he did not show sufficient compassion for the unremitting pain suffered by gay youths rejected by parents and peers. They were outraged when Warren took a political stand for Proposition 8, which overturned legal same-sex marriage in California in 2008 and is now before the U.S. Supreme Court.²

To be sure, the published reports about these attacks suggest both that they are uncommon and that many find them troubling. Still, dismissive, scornful, and angry comments and criticisms about Christians and also more general suspiciousness of Christians now seem to be on the rise.

This prompts the question, “Why now?” Nearly all of the problems and challenges have been put in one form or another for decades and even centuries, but now they are becoming more open and more hostile. One reads David Hume on natural religion or Bertrand Russell on why he is not a Christian, and one finds arguments that the Christian faith is unreasonable and detects the sentiment that Christian believers are either not very smart or rather scared, but one does not sense resentment or anger. Ludwig Feuerbach did regard his work as “negative, destructive,” but in terms of its philosophical and theological implications, not its tone.³ He regarded the highest ideal to be “that he is a quiet philosopher, not a loud and still less a brawling one.”⁴ Nietzsche, of course, was openly hostile, but he seemed to know, like the Madman who announced the death of God, that he had come too early. But today one cannot mistake the hostility even in the titles of books like *The God Delusion* and *God Is Not Great*, and one now regularly finds that Christians are viewed suspiciously and negatively. What has happened?

When speaking about published attacks—like books, *The End of Faith* and *Nonbeliever Nation*, or the movie “Religulous”—one can sense fear and frustration. There is fear because religious belief is seen to justify oppression, violence, and even terrorism. It is no coincidence that

this upsurge has taken place after 9/11. There is also fear because of the recently rising profile of religion, especially the Christian religion, in American civil politics. The fact that many candidates running for high political offices, including the Presidency of the United States, openly express faith in Jesus Christ and deny evolution on the basis of the Bible, is frightening. For example, it is this fear that prompted David Niose, a former president of the American Humanist Association (AHA), to write *Nonbeliever Nation*, a call for secular Americans to become politically active and influential, because

If America does not learn to recognize and respect nonbelievers and religious skeptics as a valued segment of the population, bleak times will surely await the country and the rest of the world. Over three decades ago, when religious conservatives became a major political force, the country embarked on a terrible, long descent—one that continues today and will not be reversed without a renewed appreciation of reason, critical thinking, and the forward-looking values of Secular Americans.⁵

This fact is also frustrating. Niose began his book by observing how presidential politics were in 1912. He cites Woodrow Wilson as believing in evolution and wondering how questions about it could be raised; Theodore Roosevelt as an admirer of Charles Darwin; William Howard Taft as a skeptic who denied Christ’s divinity and other articles of the Christian faith; and Eugene Debs as a critic of organized religion. But the election of 2012, with Republican contenders denying evolution, could only indicate a great decline for Niose.⁶ Such developments show that what is perceived to be “rationalism” is not flourishing and eradicating “ignorance” and “irrationalism” among Americans, and that means compounding fear with frustration.

Yet another factor is the simple fact that Christians have lost their assumed place in society. As a matter of history, “Christian” simply is associated with “how things used to be,” when people went to church on Sundays and the stores were closed, when children prayed in their classrooms and manger scenes went

up in front of city halls and in town squares every Christmas. Now there is more openness to other ideas and more readiness to listen to criticism.

This, then, is a “hand-waving explanation” about the “who, what, and why” of today’s attacks on the Christian faith. In the remainder of this article, I will identify four easily identified criticisms of Christians and their faith, and then close with a few remarks.

“Christianity is irrational”

The poster who urged Rick Warren to “abandon primitive superstitions and accept the universe for what it is” is in effect calling him and his faith “irrational.” He did not identify any “primitive superstitions,” but they likely include such claims as talking animals (Genesis 3:1–5; Numbers 22:28–30); a staff that turned into a snake (Exodus 4:1–4); the ark whose proximity parted waters (Joshua 3:13), brought down city walls (Joshua 6:1–20), and caused tumors (1 Samuel 5:6–12); a fish that swallowed a prophet (Jonah 1:17); and Jesus himself, who healed diseases, cleansed lepers, gave sight to the blind, cast out demons, and raised the dead, to say nothing of being born of a virgin, rising from the dead, and ascending into the heavens. So are the claims that the universe was created in six days (Genesis 1); that the sun traveled around the earth (Joshua 10:13); and that heaven and earth will be destroyed by fire (2 Peter 3:7)—claims that would all seem to fail to “accept the universe for what it is.” For that matter, to anyone who thinks these things, God, heaven, and hell could only be beliefs of a primitive, superstitious people.

These claims gave comedian and television host Bill Maher some telling lines in the movie “Religulous.”⁷ In one exchange, he told U. S. Senator Mark Pryor that he had a problem that the senator—“one of the very few people who are really running this country”—would also “believe in a talking snake.”

Senator Pryor answered: “You don’t have to pass an IQ test to be in the Senate, though.”

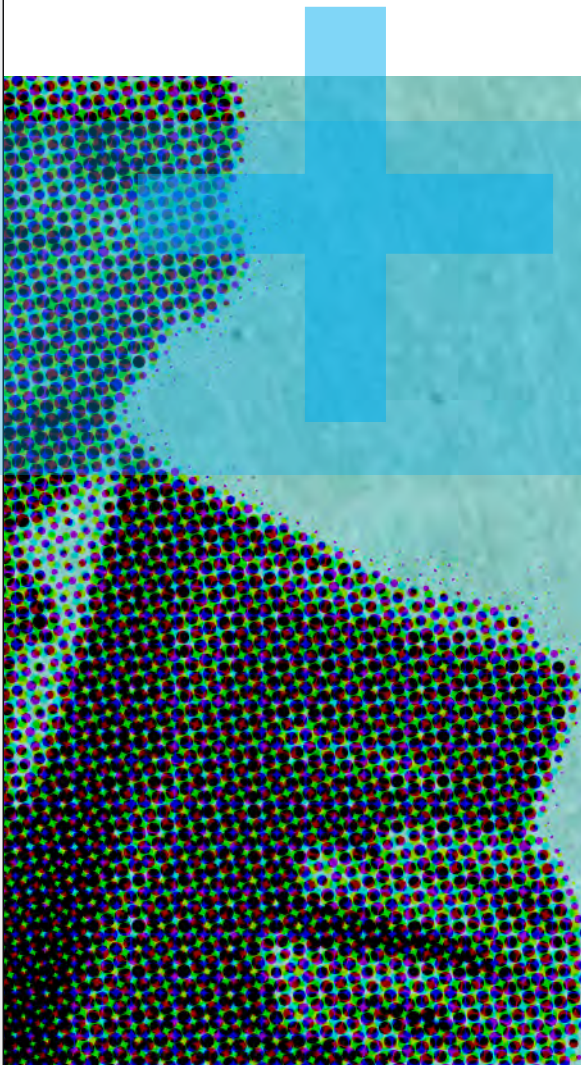
The “New Atheists” have attacked in the same way. Richard Dawkins called Yahweh “arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty,

unjust, unforgiving control freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully”—and then said it was “unfair to attack such an easy target.”⁸ Christopher Hitchens said that the “early fathers of faith ... were living in a time of abysmal ignorance and fear,” by which he meant that “Aquinas half believed in astrology,” “Augustine was a self-centered fantasist and an earth-centered ignoramus,” and “Luther was terrified of demons and believed that the mentally afflicted were the devil’s work.”⁹ Sam Harris said that “the doctrines of modern religions are no more tenable than those which, for lack of adherents, were cast upon the scrap heap of mythology millennia ago; for there is no more evidence to justify a belief in the literal existence of Yahweh and Satan than there was to keep Zeus perched upon his mountain throne or Poseidon churning the seas.”¹⁰

Their charges also show that they arise from

the willingness to take beliefs without clear evidence. In themselves, then, this *kind of* belief, and not only the actual beliefs, seems irrational. Sam Harris explains:

Even most fundamentalists live by the lights of reason ... it is just that their minds seem to have been partitioned to accommodate the profligate truth claims of their faith. Tell a devout Christian that his wife is cheating on him, or that frozen yogurt can make a man invisible, and he is likely to require just as much evidence as anyone else, and to be persuaded only to the extent you give it. Tell him that the book he keeps by his bed was written by an invisible deity who will punish him with fire for eternity if he fails to accept its every incredible claim about the universe, and he seems to require no evidence whatsoever.¹¹



“Christians are bad”

The idea that Christians are irrational explains why they face disdain and scorn, but they face suspicion and hostility when they are thought to be bad, that is, insensitive, arrogant, hypocritical, or judgmental. Some attacked Rick Warren because he was considered insensitive for his stand on same-sex marriage. “Insensitive” also summarizes Gandhi’s feelings toward Christianity. As a youth he had been exposed to a range of religions, and he developed a sense of toleration toward all of them—with one exception:

Only Christianity was at the time an exception. I developed a sort of dislike for it. And for a reason. In those days Christian missionaries used to stand in a corner near the high school and hold forth, pouring abuse on Hindus and their gods. I could not endure this. I must have stood there to hear them only once, but that was enough to dissuade me from repeating the experiment. About the same time I heard of a well-known Hindu having been converted to Christianity. It was the talk of the town that, when he was baptized, he had to eat beef and drink liquor, that he also had to change his clothes, and that thenceforth he began to go about in European costume, including a hat. These things got on my nerves. Surely, thought I, a religion that compelled one to eat beef, drink liquor, and change one’s clothes did not deserve the name. I also heard that the new convert had already begun abusing the religion of his ancestors, their customs and their country. All these things created in me a dislike for Christianity.¹²

These feelings about Christians, if not attacks themselves on Christians, are common. David Kinnaman, president of the Barna Group (well known for their research on faith and culture), found that among young adult non-Christians (“outsiders”), “We have become famous for what we oppose, rather than for what we are for.”¹³ Furthermore, this attitude explains their “growing hostility” toward Christians:

They say their aggression simply matches the oversized opinions and egos of Christians. One outsider put it this way: “Most people I meet assume that *Christian* means very conservative, entrenched in their thinking, anti-gay, anti-choice, angry, violent, illogical, empire builders; they want to convert everyone, and they generally cannot live peacefully with anyone who doesn’t believe what they believe.”¹⁴

Such attitudes turn out to be common. From his research Kinnaman identified these six themes as “the most common points of skepticism and objections raised by outsiders” to Christians:

1. *Hypocritical*. Outsiders consider us hypocritical—saying one thing and doing another—and they are skeptical of our morally superior attitude.
2. *Too focused on getting converts*. Outsiders wonder if we genuinely care about them.
3. *Antihomosexual*. Outsiders say Christians are bigoted and show disdain for gays and lesbians.
4. *Sheltered*. Christians are thought of as old-fashioned, boring, and out of touch with reality.
5. *Too political* ... [W]e are overly motivated by a political agenda, that we promote and represent politically conservative interests and issues.
6. *Judgmental*. Outsiders think of Christians as quick to judge others They doubt that we really love people as we say we do.¹⁵

Of course, it is easy to believe that a significant portion of older generations share these perceptions and respond sometimes in the same ways. For example, after Jason Collins, a professional basketball player, announced that he was homosexual, some Christians used the occasion to announce that homosexuality is a sin. Whether this was wise or always wisely done are questions worth discussing (but on a different occasion), but there is no question that some took these, not at face value, but as disguised expressions of contempt. Mike Wise, a columnist for *The Washington Post*, was one: “While many voiced support for (or at least tolerance of) Collins in the aftermath, some used his historic announcement to call homosexuality a sin and

an open rebellion toward God and otherwise trumpeted their bigotry under the guise of ‘religious beliefs.’”¹⁶ He offered, however, no reason or explanation for identifying these messages as “bigotry.” Moreover, Wise’s column was titled “Jason Collins’s religious critics need to practice what they preach,” implying hypocrisy on their part. Here, however, he did have a reason—and a point: “But let’s at least be consistent: If the outrage at Collins is all about religion, where was the contempt for Shawn Kemp’s and Antonio Cromartie’s serial fathering? Really, why is an openly gay athlete evoking such fervor while a womanizing athlete is just one of the fellas?”¹⁷

“Christian faith is dangerous”

Closely related to the view that Christian beliefs are irrational and that Christian people are bad is the suspicion that they are *dangerous*. As the subtitle to *The End of Faith*—“Religion, Terror, and the Future of Religion”—this is the thesis of Sam Harris’s book, a point he repeats in the Afterword to the paperback edition:

Since *The End of Faith* was first published, current events have remained a running confirmation of its central thesis. There are days when almost every headline in the morning paper attests to the social costs of religious faith, and the nightly news seems miraculously broadcast from the fourteenth century. One spectacle of religious hysteria follows fast upon the next ... For anyone with eyes to see, there can be no doubt that religious faith remains a perpetual source of human conflict. Religion persuades otherwise intelligent men and women to not think, or to think badly, about questions of civilizational importance.¹⁸

The last sentence summarizes Harris’s basic complaint, which he relates more fully this way:

The danger of religious faith is that it allows otherwise normal human beings to reap the fruits of madness and consider them *holy*. Because each new generation is taught that religious propositions need not be justified in the way that all others,

civilization is still besieged by the armies of the preposterous. We are, even now, killing ourselves over ancient literature. Who would have thought something so tragically absurd could be possible?¹⁹

For Harris, the “fruits of madness” among Christians in history include the Inquisition, witch hunts, and anti-Semitism leading to Nazi Germany and the extermination of Jews.²⁰

Others stress that Christians have been dangerous to children. Certainly the many recent cases of child sexual abuse by priests in the Roman Catholic Church and by ministers of other churches, compounded with accounts of cover-ups and denials, have not only revealed widespread and terrible problems, but have heightened suspicion and distrust of Christians, and attacks against them.²¹

Richard Dawkins, however, goes even farther. He has famously said that religious beliefs and upbringing *are* child abuse, and that they could be worse than sexual abuse. “[H]orrible as sexual abuse no doubt was, the damage was arguably less than the long-term psychological damage inflicted by bringing the child up Catholic in the first place.”²² Why? What is it that he suspects is literally abusive? “I am persuaded that the phrase ‘child abuse’ is no exaggeration when used to describe what teachers and parents are doing to children whom they encourage to believe in something like the punishment of unshriven mortal sins in an eternal hell.”²³

“God is dead”

In “Religulous,” Bill Maher interviews a man who said that he converted because he asked God for things in the name of Jesus and they happened. Maher likened God to Santa Claus. “I don’t believe in Santa Claus,” he was told.

“Of course not,” replied Maher sarcastically. “That’s ridiculous. That’s one man flying all around the world and dropping presents down a chimney. That’s ridiculous. One man hearing everybody murmur to him at the same time ... that I get.”

What he got, of course, is that God seems to exist *because* we get what we want.

Maher’s comparison of God to Santa Claus is not only common, but it echoes the more cutting remarks of 19th century poet Charles Baudelaire, who wrote,

Even though God did not exist, Religion would be none the less holy and divine.

God is the sole being who has no need to exist in order to reign.

That which is created by the Mind is more living than Matter.²⁴

The most prostitute of all beings is the Supreme Being, God Himself, since for each man he is the friend above all others; since he is the common, inexhaustible fount of Love.²⁵

God and His profundity. It is possible even for the intelligent man to seek in God that helper and friend whom he can never find. God is the eternal confident in that tragedy of which each man is hero. Perhaps there are usurers and assassins who say to God: “Lord, grant that my next enterprise may be successful!” But the prayers of these vile persons do not mar the virtue and joy of my own.²⁶

It is hard to imagine outsiders being *angry* about such religion, but easy to see them being dismissive, as Nietzsche was when he said: “Why atheism nowadays? ‘The Father’ in God is thoroughly refuted; equally so ‘the judge,’ ‘the rewarder.’ Also his ‘free will’: he does not hear—and even if he did, he would not know how to help.”²⁷ Nietzsche was adverting to what he would famously call the “death” of God. For Nietzsche, “God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.”²⁸ And for him, churches were nothing but “tombs and sepulchers of God.”²⁹

This charge is different than the other charges we have considered in two respects. In the first place, it will not generate the kind of heat or bite or fear that the charges of being irrational, bad, or dangerous will. This will seem relatively harmless. The second respect is more problematic. This charge can strike a lot

of Christians where they think they are doing well. This is because we find such religion not only among many preachers of a “prosperity gospel” and a lot of “faith healers,” but also in books like *The Prayer of Jabez* and in the ministry and programs of many churches. Sociologist Christian Smith, who has studied the religious and spiritual lives of American teenagers and young adults, has labeled the religion of many youth “moralistic therapeutic deism.”³⁰ This is a religion whose “creed” would go like this:

1. A god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.³¹

This in itself represents a challenge for Christian witness and instruction, but what is more relevant to our concern here and also more disturbing is that American churches themselves often promote this kind of faith. For example, this is what sociologist Robert Wuthnow found in many small groups. Wuthnow produced the first large-scale study of the American “support group” movement.³² He found that small groups helped many of their members to find God relevant to their daily lives, and that was usually taken to be an advantage. But this also brought disadvantages:

The disadvantages are less apparent, but are nevertheless worth considering. One is that God ceases to be a supreme being who is in all respects superior to humans. Rather than being the inscrutable deity of the Reformation, for example, God is now a buddy. God no longer represents such

awe-inspiring qualities as being infinite, all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly righteous. God is now on the same level as yourself, except perhaps a little warmer and friendlier ... The other danger of the present conception is that a God of daily relevance can also become a God of triviality ... What they do know is that God is present in their daily lives and that knowing God somehow works. But if the existence of God depends on whether or not God works, then it may be tempting to alter the criteria of what works to the point that minor victories are all that matter. God exists because people are struggling with the “nitty gritty”—which is conveniently left up to them to define.³³

And once God’s existence and nature are up to the daily struggles with the “nitty gritty,” it is not hard to draw comparisons to Santa Claus.

What should we make of this?

In this article, I have only tried to identify and explain a few ways in which Christians today find themselves viewed with and exposed to suspicion, disdain, or hostility. I have said nothing about what to make of this, but I will close with a few brief thoughts in this vein.

1. We should *take seriously the questions, challenges, and criticisms*. This does not mean necessarily agreeing with them, but it does mean not dismissing them out of hand or automatically attributing them to unbelief, resentment, or meanness. Of course, some criticisms and attacks are mistaken and unfair, but we should strive to be fair in response. Moreover, we should not pay attention only to the sharpest, loudest, or most numerous questions and criticisms, but also those put more gently and tentatively, which is often how our fellow Christians and our friends and neighbors will put them.

2. We should, however, be careful not to become primarily *reactive* by only responding to or dealing with the specific questions and criticisms. We should also ask why they arise in the first place and how we might be inviting them. This was one reason for the last point about “the death of God.” Christians

themselves in their life and witness—in worship and preaching and evangelism and programs—are inviting others to think that religion is primarily something *for them* and *about them*. At least from a distance, that is easy to see—and easy to dismiss.

3. We should *learn anew what it means to live by faith*. This point may be tricky, because one common response to the charge that Christian beliefs are irrational is to say that it is a matter of “faith,” saying, for example: “I take it on faith that the Bible is the Word of God.” The distinction between “faith” and “reason” implied here usually sounds desperate, not only to critics like Sam Harris (who attacks this mercilessly), but to nearly anyone. Why? Because it seems to mean that one believes the Bible either because of an entirely personal decision or because of some inner feeling or other quality one labels “faith.” In either case, it is impossible not to suspect that “faith in the Bible” is only a personal preference.

Christian faith, however, is faith in Christ. He is the object of our faith. Faith, to be sure, is personal (“I believe”), but saving faith is faith *in* someone, namely, *Jesus Christ*.

The challenge posed by the questions and challenges we have considered here is to promote and embody this *fully*. In the past, when Christians had a position of authority, they did not have to argue for the identity of God or of Jesus, nor did they have to argue for the authority of the Scriptures and the rightness of the Christian faith. Of course, there were disagreements about how one properly related to God through Jesus Christ (i.e., the question of justification), about biblical interpretation, and about dogmas. But usually Christians did not have to contend for the message and teaching of the Church nor for living by faith in Christ as such.

Things now are different. Living by faith has not changed, but what it means to do so has changed to an extent. That extent is the degree to which the situation dictates how fully the Christian story needs to be told and how extensively the Christian faith needs to be taught. Today, it is in the *fullest* degree. In this way, we return to the situation of the first Christians, like Paul on Mars Hill (Acts 17). In fact, Paul’s speech at the Areopagus is a model

for the story as we should tell it today. He took nothing for granted there. He did not even assume his hearers knew what he meant by “god,” because “god” for him and for Christians was no mere idol, but the Creator of all things who resurrected His Son from the grave to confirm His identity as the Judge of the living and the dead.

Notes

- 1 Andrew Todhunter, “In the Footsteps of the Apostles,” *National Geographic* 221, no. 3 (March 2012): 46.
- 2 Cathy Lynn Grossman, “Vitriol infests Rick Warren family’s grief,” *www.washingtonpost.com*, http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/on-faith/vitriol-infests-rick-warren-familys-grief/2013/04/08/d214c080-a071-11e2-bd52-614156372695_story.html?hpid=z3?adsf. Accessed 01 May 2013.
- 3 Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot, with an introductory essay by Karl Barth and a foreword by H. Richard Niebuhr (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, Inc., 1957), xxxvi.
- 4 Ibid. xlii.
- 5 David Niose, *Nonbeliever Nation: The Rise of Secular Americans* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
- 6 Ibid. 3–4.
- 7 Bill Maher et al, “Religulous,” directed by Larry Charles (Lionsgate: Santa Monica, CA, 2008). All references to “Religulous” are about this release.
- 8 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006), 31.
- 9 Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York and London: Twelve, 2007), 63–64.
- 10 Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2004), 16.
- 11 Ibid. 19. Harris, Dawkins, and Hitchens are very selective in their treatment of Christians. John W. Loftus, however, makes a more careful, thorough, and challenging case in his book, *Why I Became an Atheist: A Former Preacher*

- Rejects Christianity* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2008). Loftus had been a Christian pastor and apologist who gave up the faith. His knowledge and experience not only as an “insider” but also as a minister and apologist enable him to offer a detailed case against the Christian faith.
- 12 Mohandas K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, trans. Mahadav Desai (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), 33–34.
 - 13 David Kinnaman with Gabe Lyons, *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity... and Why It Matters*, foreword by George Barna (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 26. “Outsiders” is a technical term in their research: “those individuals who look at Christianity ‘from the outside in.’ This group includes atheists and agnostics; those affiliated with a faith other than Christianity (such as Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Mormonism, and so on), and other unchurched adults who are not born again Christians. The use of the term *outsider* is not meant to be pejorative; other possible labels for this group of people are less applicable or appropriate” (249).
 - 14 Ibid.
 - 15 Ibid. 29–30.
 - 16 Mike Wise, “Jason Collins’s religious critics need to practice what they preach,” www.washingtonpost.com/sports/wizards/jason-collins-religious-critics-need-to-practice-what-they-preach/2013/04/30/3129e752-b1df-11e2-9a98-4be1688d7d84_story.html. Accessed 01 May 2013.
 - 17 Ibid.
 - 18 Harris, *The End of Faith*, 237.
 - 19 Ibid. 73.
 - 20 Ibid. 80–107.
 - 21 See also Janet Heimlich, *Breaking Their Will: Shedding Light on Religious Child Maltreatment* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2011) and the website for the Child-Friendly Faith Project (childfriendlyfaith.org) for other accounts of religion, including Christianity, and child abuse.
 - 22 Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 317.
 - 23 Ibid. See also Christopher Hitchens’s chapter on this topic: “Is Religion Child Abuse?” in *God Is Not Great*, 217–228.
 - 24 Charles Baudelaire, *Intimate Journals*, trans. Christopher Isherwood (Hollywood: Marcel Rodd, 1947; reprint, San Francisco: City Light Books, 1983), 21.
 - 25 Ibid. 74.
 - 26 Ibid. 90.
 - 27 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Helen Zimmern, introduction by Willard Huntington Wright (New York: The Modern Library Publishers, 1917), 60.
 - 28 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science with a prelude in rhymes and an appendix of songs*, trans. with commentary by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 181.
 - 29 Ibid. 182.
 - 30 Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).
 - 31 Ibid. 162–163.
 - 32 Robert Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America’s New Quest for Community* (New York: Free Press, 1994).
 - 33 Ibid. 239. Others have noted how this appears in the preaching of American churches. See, for example, John W. Wright, *Telling God’s Story: Narrative Preaching for Christian Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007).



Apologetics in a University Context

Nowhere is the challenge to Christianity stronger than on the secular campuses of our institutions of higher learning. This is not to resurrect the complaints of yesteryear about our “godless universities,” but to assert the obvious: in a climate of free inquiry required at any academic level, students, away from the protective primary environment in which they grew up, are extremely vulnerable to the teachings of faculty that may merely be prodding them into thought in the best case scenario, or may systematically be trying to undermine their faith in the worst.

Almost by nature students are often rebellious in their late teens and early twenties, and may have doubts about their previous convictions. This otherwise normal rite of passage in their thinking, however, is more deeply impacted today by an accelerating barrage of attacks on Christianity in the secular media and a culture growing more hostile to the church and its beliefs.

In this article, I will discuss the nature of this offensive against the faith, especially as it reaches the campuses of our colleges and universities today, and how students as well as Christian faculty might respond intellectually to the many popular fusillades that target the faith today.

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Challenges to Christianity

With so withering a variety of assaults on the historical Jesus in current culture, it becomes difficult even to list the categories of attack. We shall, however, endeavor to do so none the less.

The Shabby Shortcut: Jesus Never Existed.

Lazy critics try to win a quick victory in debate with this argument, claiming that every mention of Jesus in ancient secular writings is interpolated, while every mention in Christian sources is, of course, a case of myth-building. While this may seem to be an exercise in absurdity, a cacophony of voices is raising this claim today. In the Easter 2013 edition of the *Ames Tribune*, the agnostic or atheist head of the religion department at Iowa State University, wrote that the debate today is between those who believe that Jesus was a historical figure and those who do not, with the professor inclining to the latter grouping. Remember when the debate used to be whether Jesus was divine or merely human? Bizarre as it may seem, there is a computer blog at: Jesusneverexisted.com

Yes, Jesus Existed, But He's Not Who You Thought He Was. This general category includes most critics of Christianity today in various groupings.

- **The Corrupted Text Transmissionists.** Whether motivated by serious concerns over the reliability of biblical texts or reaching for sensationalism in trying to cut Christianity off at the pass, scholars or lay theologians in this group claim that in many recopyings of biblical documents across the centuries, errors were introduced by copyists that were augmented by further errors added down the line by manuscript transmission, so that what we have today is corrupted material. Muslims and Mormons have claimed this for



centuries, and Bart Ehrman, agnostic head of the religion department at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, does the same in books such as *Misquoting Jesus* and *Forged*. It is hard to miss Ehrman on the various television specials on Jesus.

- The Gnostic Gospelists. An ever-increasing group of scholars, again working in the Groves of Academe, have become enthralled with the discovery at Nag Hammadi in Egypt c. 1945 of a library of Coptic materials purporting to be early Gospels that tell a very different account of Jesus from that in the canonical four. Dr. Elaine Pagels of Princeton University, Professors Helmut Koester and Karen King of Harvard University, and others have joined the train of those who assign great value to the information contained in them, so much so that it leads some to wonder if indeed the early church made the right choice in excluding these from any canonical consideration.
- The Christ Caricaturists. But why limit those who try to undermine Christianity to the campus scholarly community? A veritable host of “camp followers” have arrived in their wake, seizing on their critiques of Christianity for their own literary purposes. I refer, of course, to those writers playing what I call “the Jesus game.” Here’s how they play it: they may read the Gospels once, then never again, letting the material mellow in their minds. Later, catalyzed by their own creative juices, they start providing sensationalizing new spins on Jesus and his ministry that have little or nothing to do with the historical Jesus, providing not Christ, but caricature.

In the 1960s, Hugh Schonfield gave us Jesus, the Passover Plotter. Next came S.G.F. Brandon, who showed us Jesus, the Radical Revolutionary. In 1971, John Allegro unveiled Jesus, the Mushroom Cultist who Never Existed, while Morton Smith forged a manuscript “discovery” showing Jesus as the Master Magician. The list goes on. Donovan Joyce presented Jesus, the Senescent Savior, as Baigent, Lincoln, and Leigh, in their *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* offered Jesus, the Happy Husband. Copying this caricature, Dan Brown added further falsities in his *The Da Vinci Code*. And by the way, you win “the Jesus Game” by offering the most off-the-wall and over-the-top version of who Jesus was. That is the version that will drive people to the bookstores or turn the television channel.

Finally, and in fairness, there is another category.

- The Honest Critics. Certainly there are some scholars who, for reasons that are not prompted by sensationalism or sales, have honest doubts about the sources on Jesus and Christianity in general. Often, they are fair and thoughtful sorts who resist the temptation to parade their doubts about Christianity before their classes. After responding to the variety of defective challenges to the faith listed above, this is the group I will address with collegial interest rather than dismissal.

Correcting Misinformation

Refuting the popular attacks on Christianity takes no great skill. I have often maintained that against all the other religious systems in the world, Christianity is far and away, the easiest to defend on a purely intellectual basis. It is, however, embarrassing to note how many

of the more worthless claims against the faith do, in fact, originate from misguided faculty on university campuses. Our grandparents' worries about the "godless universities" were not entirely unfounded. As a campus chaplain for 41 years, I can also report that the very worst advice parents can give their college-bound sons and daughters is: "Be sure to take a course or two in religion." They mean well, of course, but often their offspring will be subjected to professors who feel it their bounden duty to liberate students from "home grown myths" and begin their courses in a cutesy manner by announcing, "First let me tell you where I'm coming from: I'm half Druid and half Zen-Buddhist."

When I began teaching at Western Michigan University in 1960, it was my great good fortune to be invited on to the faculty of History rather than Religion. In this way, I was not forced to give as much time to Shinto as to Christianity in my lectures. Rather, it was a delight for me to use the tools of historical methodology in examining the credentials of Christianity. "Was I able to bring the faith into my teaching?" is a question I'm often asked. Quite naturally, I never proselytized, but how can you teach Western Civilization or Medieval History without involving Christianity in major fashion?

Arguments against or for Christianity hinge, ultimately, not on religion but on history. Any rebuttal to assaults on the faith must rest on historical evidence as derived from sources ranging from ancient records to modern archaeology. Next, then, we will test the claims against Christianity on the basis of historical methodology.

Jesus Never Existed? This "short-cut" is an utter failure and used only by the uninformed, the lazy, the illogical, or the dishonest skeptics. Anyone who uses it should be profoundly embarrassed, since it flies in the face of all evidence. We have more source information on Jesus from the ancient world than for anyone else. Anyone defending the faith should be able to rattle off six *major* references to Jesus in *totally non-Christian, secular literature* from the ancient world:

Cornelius Tacitus, *Annals*, 15:44

Gaius Suetonius, *Life of Claudius*, 35

Pliny the Younger, *Letter to Trajan*, and Trajan's Reply

Sanhedrin 43a in the Jewish *Talmud* (Jesus' arrest notice)

Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18:63

Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities*, 20:200

There are more, but the above, quite apart from the mass of early Christian history and literature, should be sufficient. Even so trenchant a critic as Bart Ehrman admits that "Yes," there was indeed a historical figure named Jesus of Nazareth.

Were Biblical Texts Corrupted in Recopying? Mormons claim it happened already in the first century. This is a totally impossible view, since the New Testament documents could hardly have become brittle enough to recopy so soon after they were written. At least the Muslims argue that they were corrupted across six centuries of recopying, while Bart Ehrman argues that there are more variations in the texts than total words in the New Testament.

All of this is as futile an argument as that of the Mormons. Whereas classical manuscripts from the past exist only in tens and rarely hundreds, the New Testament has an extraordinary number of surviving manuscripts, some 5,700 in whole or in part. With so vast a sea of manuscripts, mathematics alone mandates a larger number of textual variations. Yet, not one of these variations in spelling or punctuation or any other rubric affects even one aspect of Jesus' life or even one doctrine of the faith. Unfortunately, Ehrman continues to try erecting huge mountains out of the tiniest molehills.

The accuracy of biblical manuscript transmission was proven by the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947. Two complete manuscripts of Isaiah were among them. Before their discovery, the oldest manuscripts of Isaiah came from A.D. 1006. In comparing

manuscript transmission across twelve centuries, scholars found that they had only rare and tiny variations in the text.

Are the Gnostic Gospels Reliable?

Anything but! The easiest refutation is merely to invite anyone to read them. Rather than the false cant that the church is trying to hide them from you, do feel free to download any that you wish from Google and other sources. All of them are pathetic attempts by would-be novelists eighteen hundred years ago who tried to gild the scriptural lily by fanciful addenda and garish falsehoods that fairly reek from the printed page. All of them are late and derivative from the original Gospels. Instead of being historical, they are anti-historical in the sense of perverting facts from the past. Most of them, however, are word-salads full of terms like “firmaments,” “demiurges,” “aeons,” and general nonsense.

Only one has some coherence: the so-called *Gospel of Thomas*. It has no narrative matrix, only a string of 114 claimed sayings of Jesus. It totally defeats itself with an absolutely daft claim in Saying No. 114. Here, the disciples bring Mary Magdalene to Jesus, claiming that since she is a woman, she cannot attain eternal life. Jesus’ response? “I will turn her into a man so that she may have life!”

The rules for including material in the canon are simple and threefold: 1) The document must have been written by an eyewitness or near eyewitness; 2) It must agree with the theological

context of Christianity; and 3) It must have been in wide use in the early church. Note that the most comparatively readable of all the Gnostic gospels fails all three criteria.

Fraud has also reared its ugly head in this regard. When Professor Karen King at Harvard revealed a document, in Coptic, that had Jesus referring to his “wife,” Mary Magdalene, and the Smithsonian Institution promised a big television special on what they hyped as one of the greatest discoveries of the modern era, the show never came off. Why? The touted document turned out to be a fraud!

Is the lust for novelty and sensation that strong among presumably serious scholars that, while straining at the gnat of powerful Christian evidence, they swallow the camel of worthless material?

Popular Images of Christ: Fact or Fiction?

Those who play the “Jesus game” and serve up caricatures of Jesus, prostituting history and truth in the process, are really beneath contempt and deserve no more space in a serious article. One merely wonders how such a pollution of fact is possible against clear, unimpeachable evidence from the past.

A very recent example would be Candida Moss, professor of early Christianity at Notre Dame. In her latest book, Moss claims that most of the Roman persecutions of Christians never happened, this despite Eusebius, the “father of church history,” giving us chapter and verse, names upon names, of those who were



martyred for the faith, eyewitness reports, and documentation from both Christian and pagan sources that the persecutions were not only absolutely authentic but horrendous to report. Publishers have been corrupted into marketing anything that will sell. Evidently, truth is boring while lies are sensational.

Defending the Faith

This is not to claim that all scholarly criticisms of the biblical documents are unfounded and unjustified. The honest critics, who eschew sensationalism and have a genuine concern for the truth, deserve to be answered as well. I would only request that they not subject biblical sources to the double standard so characteristic of biblical scholarship, namely, holding biblical sources to a much more stringent set of standards for examination than for secular sources from the ancient world. Because of this disparity, I have found that totally secular ancient historians, who do not use a double standard, have a higher appreciation for biblical sources than do historians of religion and theologians.

Were such stringent standards applied to secular figures from ancient history, some might conclude that Alexander the Great either never lived, or we can know next to nothing about him. Indeed, there are far more primary sources on Jesus and transmitted texts than for Alexander.

To be sure, we wish we had a far more detailed account of the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. With the invention of printing, we would be entitled to more. But the early church could afford only one scroll in passing along what was deemed the “Good News,” which is why each Gospel is the equivalent of a 75-page pamphlet. Scrolls cannot be much larger or they become unwieldy.

In dealing with each Gospel, the ancient historian, using the tools of his craft, has several criteria to try to determine what is actually true from the ancient world and what is not. Here are several of the most usable.

The Criterion of Multiple Attestation. When a variety of ancient sources agree that a given episode truly happened and they are not copying from one another, the conclusion is that the material is factual. In this regard, there

are hundreds of points of tangency between scriptural and secular evidence from the ancient world that concur in terms of people, places, and events.

The Criterion of Place—Geography. Obviously, it is important to know *where* an alleged event took place. If a document claims it happened, for example, in Middle Earth, the material is immediately dismissed as a fantasy novel, fiction rather than fact. Locations must be authentic before proceeding further. Both the Old and New Testaments are crammed with names of empires, kingdoms, states, provinces, oceans, rivers, streams, brooks, mountains, valleys, metropolises, and villages. The list is endless. With hardly any exceptions, the places cited in the Bible are not only authentic, but often not even their spelling has changed across the centuries.

The Criterion of Time—Chronology. In determining the authenticity of something alleged in an ancient source, to assert that it happened “long, long ago” simply will not do. The chronology of the person or event must be consistent with the time grid of the contextual ancient world. But for the earliest chapters in Genesis and the genealogies, the chronology of Scripture integrates well, especially in the New Testament, where every syllable in Luke 3:1, for example, is borne out exactly in secular historical chronology.

The Criterion of Archaeological Discovery. Historical material from the ancient world must relate to the hard evidence from the many digs into corresponding strata from the ancient world. In the past century, bulging treasuries of artifacts have been recovered in the Near and East that impinge on texts in the Old and New Testaments. Thousands of artifacts that range from structural foundations to ceramics to weaponry, tools, jewelry, and inscriptions have come to light during the recent, brief 125 years of scientific archaeology.

Here are just three examples of the stunning finds that nearly always correlate well with the biblical record, all relating to Jesus’ trial and crucifixion. In 1961, a cornerstone, inscribed with the name of Pontius Pilate, was discovered at Caesarea. Despite many denials that Jesus could have been crucified by being nailed to

a cross rather than tied, the bones of the first crucified victim ever discovered, in 1968, had a seven-inch spike still lodged in the heel bones. And, most exciting of all, in 1990, the very bones of Joseph Caiaphas were found inside an ossuary uncovered at a burial site in Jerusalem, the first biblical bones ever discovered.

The Criterion of Embarrassment.

Despite its strange name, this is one of the most interesting and useful of all the criteria employed by ancient historians. It goes like this: a given source, with a known bias, concedes evidence that runs counter to that bias and must do so, since everyone at the time knows it to be true—that counter evidence, “embarrassing” to the source that must try to explain it away—stands as absolute truth, however, many centuries later.

In the case of Jesus, we have two such instances, one that nearly proves the miraculous, the other that the tomb in which he was buried was actually empty on Resurrection morning. The rabbinical traditions in Sanhedrin 43a of the Mishnah section of the Jewish Talmud, report that Jesus of Nazareth “... will be stoned, because he has practiced sorcery and lured Israel into apostasy.” What is sorcery? Something extraordinary or supernatural with help from below. What is a miracle? The same, with help from above. Now this is a hostile source and might have omitted the claim of sorcery entirely. But it did not. It rather conceded that Jesus was

doing something extraordinary or supernatural, whatever the cause.

Similarly, in the case of the resurrection, rabbinical sources—hostile to be sure—claim that Jesus’ body was stolen, thus conceding the fact that the sepulcher in which Jesus was placed on Friday evening was empty on Sunday morning. Certainly this does not prove a resurrection, but, if the resurrection truly happened, wouldn’t the empty tomb be one of its first symptoms?

Other criteria for ferreting out the truth from ancient sources might also be cited here, but these would seem sufficient for our purpose, which was to demonstrate not only that Christianity is the easiest of all world religious systems to defend, but that such a defense is based squarely on accepted norms for evaluating evidence from the ancient world. None of the other world religions could pass the scrutiny listed here with the exception, to a lesser extent, of our parent Judaism.

In the classroom, hopefully, students, armed with evidence such as this, should be able to refute any excessive claims against the faith by faculty or student colleagues, much as their parents, bombarded by a biased media, should also find the task of Christian apologetics a pleasant one. Peter had it right when he wrote: *Be ready to give an answer to everyone who asks of you a reason for your hope, but do it with gentleness and respect.* (1 Peter 3:15).





Adolescents and Apologetics: Two Inventories

Note: Books, web sites, and other readings on apologetics are abundant. This article assumes the reader is acquainted with the usual styles and strategies of apologetics, or will readily access a credible source to overview them,¹ and is aware of the caution that a practice of apologetics cannot supplant the Holy Spirit's means of grace. The article takes as given that adolescents are constantly exposed to the usual questions and issues addressed by apologetics. Teachers, pastors, DCEs, and others will either explore these matters with young people beyond the limitations of confirmation with pre-adolescents or, by default, leave them to be shaped instead by the world. The article suggests two inventories to consider when developing a Christian apologetics for young people.

We perhaps never quite recover from our own adolescence, and this may be an issue for apologetics. How so? Our personal spiritual

ruminations during adolescence and our resulting perceptions of that period and of adolescence in general tend to function as an influential perceptual set. That is, we're inclined to see and interpret our world and others according to what we, ourselves, have experienced.

This is not to say that we are ultimately trapped by our own perceptions in some postmodernist hall of mirrors.² But perception counts. It counts a lot. And our own adolescence and notions of adolescent faith development can both helpfully guide and unhelpfully constrain our making a defense for our Christian hope (1 Peter 3:15). Consider briefly two instances.

Jordan Monge describes her combative attitude toward Christian faith as an adolescent in a recent feature of *Christianity Today*.³ She leveraged her sharp, developing intellect to demolish flimsy arguments for God until she arrived at Harvard and encountered credible responses to her challenges: "I'd argued with my peers, but I'd never investigated the works of the masters—Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Descartes, Kant, Pascal, and Lewis. When I finally did, the only reasonable course of action was to believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ." Hers is a compelling example for an evidential apologetics (which also inverts the male/female head-and-heart stereotype). In her thoughtful article, Monge does not address whether such an investigation would have been effective during her high school years. Would it?

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In his book, *Why Believe?*, C. Stephen Evans begins with the story of a young man, strong emotions, and personal tragedy as a context for our developing helpful ways of addressing faith questions.⁴ We learn that the young man takes his own life, having expressed to Evans a despair that "... [F]aith would make life very satisfying. I wish I could believe what you believe. But I just can't." This poignant event compelled Evans to develop a cumulative apologetics drawing from several sorts of reasoning and persuasion to build a gentle, informal case for faith. He does not insist that this approach will help everyone. It may be more effective with seekers than with debaters.

My point is that, while important, such accounts—our own and others—tend to convey a particular outlook on adolescent faith and non-faith with some corresponding apologetic to appeal to that same particular adolescent. The aim here is not to dismiss or promote any particular outlook or apologetic style but to avoid a one-size-fits-all ministry with young people limited by our own experience and perceptual sets (that may have more to do with our own adolescence than theirs). We do better to be prepared with various approaches to young people in their various conditions of belief and non-belief.⁵ What follows, then, are two inventories for an adaptable approach to adolescent apologetics.

The Usual Suspects—and Others

Begin this inventory by returning to your own adolescence and thinking first of a friend, sibling, or acquaintance whose spirituality (or non-spirituality) you recall: pious, atheist, a weak soul, uninterested, a member of the God squad, seeker, growing in discipleship, etc. And, as you recall, why was this person of this particular faith character? Now recall your own faith condition, perhaps in early adolescence, perhaps in later adolescence. And why were you of that particular faith character? Whether as cases about ourselves or others, these instances appeal to us as narratives, and they do contain some validity. We were there; we know some things about ourselves and others around us. But we need a wider range of conditions than our own narratives can supply.

Approaching the issue from a first person perspective (me; my friend or acquaintance) is limited in two ways. First, we're relying on perceptions we formed as adolescents, perceptions which are surely skewed by our adolescence. Second, our explanation for our own character is typically more complex than the one we provide for the other person. We tend to attribute the other's ideas and conduct to our interpretation of their personality and discount the power of their life situations. However, we explain our own condition and behavior not just as an expression of our personality but also in the larger context of our self-narrative and the influence of our life situations. We think about ourselves and say, "It's complicated." And life is complicated. But it's complicated for the other person, too.⁶

As an alternative to the conventional list of faith conditions at the beginning of this section, I have assembled an additional typology of six profiles (which often overlap) in my work with adolescents. Its purpose is not to pigeonhole people in a close-ended way but to move beyond any single view of adolescence and faith. The profiles can serve as a starting point for further revision as discussion with that person continues, sometimes over weeks and months.

1. *The Adolescent Pharisee*

Some kids are Pharisees, perhaps in stronger or milder forms.⁷ These kids value religion as a system of rights and wrongs and as a way of trying to order their increasingly complicated social world. They retain the childhood absolutes of all-or-nothing thinking and are quick to apply the Law to others while less willing to extend the Gospel.

Ask them why the early church dropped its adherence to the third commandment Sabbath, switching to Sunday, and listen carefully to how they answer. Apologetics for them is often a source for more right answers. Instead, then, of an apologetic of evidence and proofs, we might better employ an apologetic on the nature of grace and the power of redemption.

2. *The Emotivist*

Many moral philosophers lament that ours is an emotivist culture, and that we sustain a practice of measuring truth—especially moral

truth—by our subjective feelings. Lots of adolescents are emotivists. Emotions are their source and norm for life according to this sort of calculus: a) our emotions are real and we have immediate access to their power and sincerity; b) these passions are integrally related to our relationships; c) our relationships are supremely important to us (for reasons rather opaque and hard to explain but important nonetheless because we feel them); and d) emotions are the common coin of relationships. Emotivism is so ingrained and automatic in these adolescents' belief system that they don't notice it to question it. An apologetics for these kids might best begin with the classic questions about moral truth and natural law. Doing so can help them consider a foundation for relationships and moral agency that is more stable and less ephemeral than our changing passions.

3. *The Relativist*

Adolescents who claim to be extreme relativists—absolutely all views and behavior are merely subjective and neither right nor wrong—are easily refuted by citing the most heinous examples of depravity and examining the assertion that such actions are morally defensible (child sexual abuse, destroying the New York twin trade towers, the Boston Marathon bombings, shooting twenty grade school children in Newtown).⁸ But most kids are not hardcore relativists. Their emotivist tendencies make them soft relativists who disapprove of mean-spirited behavior but accept "victimless" sins as personal choice. This common, milder form of relativism is actually a helpful station in spiritual development because it prompts young people to begin comparing truth claims and sources of authority—a critical skill they very much need in this world. To assist with developing this skill, consider the apologetics on the veracity and reliability of the Bible as a way to help them assess definitions of truth and various truth claims.

4. *The Debater*

Some of my colleagues on Concordia's campus express dismay that a number of our college freshmen (that is, recent high school students) engage in animated and often less-than-charitable arguments about (among other things) religion, the Bible, and the views of

other denominations. I sometimes wonder if these colleagues have considered where they are and whom we teach. Our society demands that older adolescents move toward resolving some version of identity or pay a severe price later for not doing so. Many kids externalize this identity project by challenging any and all ideas that don't comport with the convictions they bring to the table. They've worked this or that idea into some assembly of who they are, and any alternatives that may destabilize that framework require scrutiny—sometime vociferous scrutiny. Apologetics can teach this kid some table manners by encouraging the engagement while alerting her or him to various ways that thoughtful Christians across the ages have considered classic issues and why they arrived at different conclusions or sometimes elected not to arrive at any final conclusion. An overview of the challenges of theodicy can serve this aim.

5. *The Ambivalent*

Lots of kids do not argue and debate. They waffle indecisively about the cost of discipleship. And while moving to informed faith convictions is needed in spiritual formation,⁹ compare these two sets of texts.

- A. I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. Revelation 3:15-16
- B. Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, "I believe; help my unbelief!" Mark 9:24
- A. Therefore everyone who confesses me before men, I will also confess him before my Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies me before men, I will also deny him before my Father who is in heaven. Matthew 10:32-33
- B. Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders. John 19:38

Among the kids we work with are the ambivalent. For any variety of reasons, they are lukewarm, afraid, hesitant, and simultaneously believing and unbelieving. Not exactly the epitome of the Apostles' Creed. But they seem to be biblical. Here an apologetic of faith and doubt

may be especially instructive, comforting, and challenging as we also recall Isaiah's first servant song about quietly putting things right: "A bruised reed he will not break and a dimly burning wick he will not quench" (Isaiah 42:3).

6. *The Moralistic Therapeutic Deist*

Sociologist Christian Smith has written a well-received series of books on the religious and spiritual lives of adolescents and young adults.¹⁰ In his first book, *Soul Searching*, he characterizes teenagers as "moralist therapeutic deists" whose religion is that God created the world and set up some kind of moral rules. God wants me to be nice and get along with people, and the purpose of life is for me to be happy. When things go wrong, God is like the nice, friendly janitor in the school hallway who tells me everything will be okay, and will help me clean my locker. Smith's profile rings true with those of us who have spent years in those hallways. Not every kid is a moralistic therapeutic deist, but the many who are could benefit from the apologetics discussions on the person of Jesus, including his severity with some he encountered and his often contentious ministry. A nice place to begin is with C.S. Lewis's observation that God is not nice.

There, then, is a typology of six faith conditions for adolescents and apologetics (or for faith development in any manner). The inventory is not comprehensive or exhaustive, but it is representative. Yet a case for Christianity must also be a case in context, whether for the early church in its context of Judaism and the Mediterranean world, the Reformation context at the close of the medieval church, or our adolescents today in a 21st century context of cultural trends that shift as fast as Twitter tweets.

Context Counts

A second inventory can further help guide our selection of an apologetic's content and our discussion with young people in a culture of transience that no longer cultivates traditions. A number of aspects of our society are problematic for explaining and defending a life that transcends the tyranny of the immediate such

as biblical Christianity does. But rather than be too alarmist, we can remember that the church has thrived in periods of transition. The apostles ministered effectively in a transitory context at the close of the inter-testamental period, though they needed a bit of cajoling from the angel to get started: "Go to the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life" (Acts 5:20). Today we speak those same words of Life in a culture where, with a little cajoling, young people may come to highly value a word that does not pass away (Luke 21:33) when everything else seems to. Young people often are not savvy and insightful about the social influences in which they live and move and have their being, but they are sensitive to them. We need to be both savvy and sensitive and to articulate both, remembering that *apologia* means "a well-reasoned reply." Consider five contexts in which we must now make those replies.

1. *Marriage No Longer Looks Promising*

In 2012, the Centers for Disease Control reported that "the association between premarital cohabitation and marital instability for first marriages may have weakened."¹¹ Until now, cohabitation had been a strong predictor of divorce if the couple marries. Trends at the cultural scale are, of course, hard to track and harder to interpret. Thus, the CDC's phrase, "may have weakened." But the context of living together, marriage, divorce, and the power of promise in relationships is a clouded context for adolescents. This semester, for the first time, I had students—professed Christians—outwardly declare in class discussion that they would never marry without first living together, and this for lack of trust in the other person. In our context of divorce and mistrust in marriage (and across so many other cultural institutions), their attitude is perhaps understandable and even pragmatic. But they have not thought through the implications of this pragmatism. This context and their attitude challenge us to develop an apologetic to help young people, both Christians and non-Christians, find hope in the nature and power of God's promises to us. Here is a hope and power that can make marriage more promising.

2. *Parents Optional*

The CDC also reports that 41 percent of children are now born to unmarried mothers.¹² The demographics and underlying factors are complex, but the social implications (health, education, finances) for mother and child are predominantly negative. Given this emerging context, children reaching adolescence will ask the obvious questions about the nature and stability of relationships, covenants, commitment, and enduring healthy interdependence. Their experience and observations from today's childrearing context can also create a setup for interest and inquiry about a very different view on the nature of community from Genesis, the Gospels, and Paul's letters. It's no news that the church has mismanaged its response to the divorce tsunami over the past 50 years. We would do well to craft a better practical theology of Law-and-Gospel for this generation. We may find them highly receptive to some compassionate yet honest assessment of faithfulness and betrayal combined with some very Good News for all of us sinners.

3. *Marriage Redux—or Not?*

By the time this edition of *Issues in Christian Education* is published, the Supreme Court will have rendered its decision about whether to rule on same sex-marriage (*Hollingsworth v. Perry* and *United States v. Windsor*) and, if so, what their ruling is. In any event, the cultural shift in marriage will not be going away, and it is creating a curious context within which adolescents will consider "all the words of this Life" that we, with the apostles, declare. As heterosexuals abandon marriage en masse,

the gay and lesbian population—a very small demographic—is championing marriage and, ostensibly, committed relationships. Yes, it's more complicated than that. But consider how adolescents who have been around for a grand total of 15 to 20 years (and paying attention for just a few of those years) will try to make sense of this. A standard theme in apologetics is the nature of personhood and how our sense of self and image of God alerts us to a spiritual context different from, yet always intersecting with, the transitory contexts of this world. Adolescents in and out of the church are in transit with the gay marriage issue. We will need more than pronouncements from fifteen-minute sermons to make a well-reasoned reply that sustains both human dignity and human fallen-ness, both accountability and grace, both our agency and God's autonomy.

4. *No Grand Narrative*

Scripture's narrative of redemption history no longer prevails in our culture of biblical illiteracy. People, of course, still respond to redemption stories, though these stories are usually fiction, whether in movies, novels, or politics. Cultures also propagate some sort of grand narrative. Europe has been replacing its Christendom with a secular humanism story. Al Qaeda promotes a virulent world story of Islamic war and warlord peace. But America right now may be on hold for any grand narrative. We remain conventionally religious in many ways even as other accounts of "what's really going on" are in the running. For example, one of these others is the extrapolation of the methodological



naturalism of science into scientism, e.g., the “new atheists” (Dawkins, et al.) or the science curriculum battles in the schools.¹³ Adolescence is very much about identity, and identity is attained in and through the context of some narrative—a self-narrative within some grand narrative. If we are currently absent any prevailing larger story, then the church has an apologetics project to assemble for adolescents that presents a credible and winsome case for salvation history and God’s right-hand kingdom. And we should do this without cavalierly dismissing those temporal narratives (whether from science, the arts, or politics) that help us notice God at work in his left-hand kingdom—which can serve as attention-getters for his right-hand kingdom.

5. *Conspicuous Consumption*

Though it lacks any real narrative and anything grand, the chief identity our society assigns to our adolescents is “consumer.”¹⁴ We worry about the church as a wooden, unexamined tradition, yet the culture of adolescent consumerism is much more rote and unreflective. Fifty years into James Coleman’s youth culture,¹⁵ we and they hardly notice how their Face book-pages-monetized-by-advertising, their branded clothing, and their instant music at 99 cents a pop now define them. The kids we know are (usually) more than mere consumers, and we do love them. But for kids, “Consumption becomes a way to achieve social solidarity—relational connections with others—even as it also marks identity and status.”¹⁶ Eventually, however, the consumer identity becomes a cynical identity as the exhausted consumer realizes that “the cares of the world, the delight in riches, and the desire for things” (Mark. 4:19) are no basis for meaning and are often a formula for despair. The Center for Disease Control reports that from 1999 to 2010 the suicide rate for adults ages 35 to 64 has sharply risen by 28 percent (27 percent for men, 31 percent for women), and more Americans now die from suicide than from traffic accidents.¹⁷ These statistics suggest a trend of despair alongside the now much-reported uber-affluence of the 1 percent. This, too, is one of the cultural contexts for adolescents and a disturbing one. And apologetics is in large part

a discussion of meaning, purpose, and whether “there’s anything really going on, anyway.” This discussion is well worth conducting with young people. It is, however, a discussion that needs preparation and practice for which I have a proposal.

A Concluding Proposal

William Willimon has written, “A Christianity without Christian formation is no match for the powerful social forces at work within our society.”¹⁸ That formation begins and is sustained by the means of grace. But it is given shape and substance by dialogue, instruction, reflection, and discussion. This is the work of those with a prepared mind engaging those with an inquiring mind, or at least a receptive mind. Many adults are a bit afraid of adolescents as a remote and alien species, neither inquiring nor receptive. But that is (usually) a misperception. Adolescents are incorrigibly religious in some fashion or other. They’re just not always very biblical.

Every time is always the time to be engaging young people, formally or informally, in the apologetics topics. Now is no different. And we can always do better. To do better, our Concordia universities need a Masters or a certification program to prepare the minds of more among us who are ready to make a defense of the Christian hope and faith. We have the personnel and resources on a number of our campuses. In an age of online graduate degrees, an apologetics program would make a good fit with that format. The literature is abundant and much of it is digital. Such study calls for participants sharing their own writing and responses with each other as they practice “making their accounts with gentleness and reverence” (1 Peter 3:15). And while such a program could be located within the theology department, it could as well be sponsored as a communication, psychology, or education degree, or maybe even a history of science degree. However those details might be worked out, apologetics with adolescents is as timely today as it was for Paul and Eutychus (Acts 20:7-12)—though we hope not quite so hazardous for the kid.

Notes

- 1 A widely used primer is *Five Views on Apologetics* edited by Steven B. Cowan (Zondervan, 2000).
- 2 This issue has been sufficiently addressed in the postmodernism debates and need not be rehashed here.
- 3 "The Atheist's Dilemma," Jordan Monge. *Christianity Today*, April 4, 2013 (<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/march/atheists-dilemma.html>).
- 4 C. Stephen Evans, *Why Believe? Reason and Mystery as Pointers to God* (Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), ix-x.
- 5 We plainly see this in Jesus' ministry as he works with Nicodemus, the woman at the well, Zacchaeus, the rich young ruler, the woman taken in adultery, and others.
- 6 The Fundamental Attribution Error is the tendency to overestimate the effect of disposition or personality and underestimate the effect of the situation when explaining behavior.
- 7 Like most religious groups, the Pharisees came in different "flavors." See the discussion in the Jewish Encyclopedia under the entry for Pharisees (<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/12087-pharisees>). I use the expression, "Pharisee," for adolescents not as a denigration but to indicate that they, too, come in a variety of types, some more flexible, some more rigid and legalistic.
- 8 When one of my 10th graders, Karen, hotly defended her position of extreme relativism, I let it stand. Then on her next test when she missed three questions out of 50, I gave her an F—which (after she calmed down) prompted her to re-examine the implications of radical relativism.
- 9 Among the New Testament's several formation texts are 1 Corinthians 2:14 - 3:3, Galatians 3:23 - 4:19, Hebrews 5:11 - 6:3; 2 Peter 3:18, and 1 John 2:12-14.
- 10 See Christian Smith, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford University Press, 2005); Christian Smith, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (Oxford University Press, 2009); Christian Smith, *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (Oxford University Press, 2011).
- 11 Centers for Disease Control, National Health Statistics Report, Number 49, March 22, 2012. Note that the 2013 report does not reiterate this indication.
- 12 Centers for Disease Control, National Vital Statistics Report, Vol. 61, Number 4 (Oct. 3, 2012).
- 13 Many who actually work in the sciences, both theists and non-theists, are now distancing themselves from popularized extremist atheism. See, for example, Frans de Waal, *The Bonobo and the Atheist* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2013).
- 14 For a recent discussion of this theme in adolescent development see "Adolescent Identity in the Midst of Malls and Amazon.com: living in an alternative economy" by Terri Martinson Elton, *Journal of Lutheran Ethics*, Vol. 12, Issue 1 (January 2012).
- 15 James Coleman, *The Adolescent Society* (Free Press, 1961).
- 16 Joyce Mercer, *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood* (St. Louis: Chalis Press, 2005), 73.
- 17 Centers for Disease Control, Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, May 3, 2013. The CDC does not state causes for this alarming increase but suggests factors may include the recent economic downturn, an increase in drug overdoses, and that today's baby boomers showed a statistically increased incidence of suicidal ideation during their adolescence that has persisted into their adult years.
- 18 "Making Christians in a Secular World" by William Willimon, *Christian Century*, Oct. 22, 1986. Willimon's essay holds up well across the decades. It can be read at <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1052>.



Positive Apologetics

Christian apologetics is generally defined as the defense of the faith. Some would characterize it as the exoneration of the faith over against false caricatures. Others see it as a polemical endeavor; that is, the apologist is one who critiques and exposes the logical incoherence of non-Christian worldviews and religions. What is controversial relative to the nature of apologetics is whether or not it can be approached in a positive fashion, especially in service of evangelism. Such an approach usually begins by trying to persuade a non-Christian of: 1) the general historical reliability of the gospels; 2) Christ's deity (based on his miracles, especially the resurrection); and 3) the inspiration of the Scriptures (on the basis of Jesus' own view of the Hebrew Bible and promise of the truthfulness of the testimony of the apostles [John 14-16] which would eventually comprise the New Testament).¹

For decades, John Warwick Montgomery has argued that there is certainly a place for this within the framework of classic Lutheran theology.² He also has consistently exposed the shallow rejections of it in works

of prominent Lutheran theologians, noting that between both liberals and conservatives is a rejection of positive apologetics that "is virtually indistinguishable! Both claim that Christian revelation stands beyond proof and beyond demonstration—and that any attempt to offer an apologetic to establish its validity is to misunderstand the nature of the Christian gospel."³

The case against apologetics that might serve evangelism is not closed, however, for if "the Spirit works through the Word, and ... the Word sets forth accurate historical knowledge of Christ's life and saving work" this does not "preclude the apologetic use of such evidence. Historical knowledge, like reason, can be misused by sinful man; but it—again like reason—can be brought into obedience to Christ and employed ministerially to persuade others to accept the historical Christ as Lord of their personal history."⁴ The apologist uses reason in a ministerial fashion to point the unbeliever to the facts concerning the historical Jesus of the Bible. He seeks to persuade the unbeliever of who Jesus claimed to be and what he did. Such an approach attempts to generate *fides historica* or historical knowledge. It does not treat such *fides* or knowledge as saving faith, but does recognize, as does historic Lutheranism, that such knowledge (*notitia*) is the objective foundation of faith in terms of its assent (*assensus*) and ultimately trust (*fiducia*) in Christ alone.

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Critiques of a Positive Approach

One of the more significant critiques of this approach comes from the presuppositionalist school of apologetics. It claims that an inductive and evidential approach to apologetic evangelism is, at best, doomed to failure and, at worst, dangerously close to conceding too much to secular epistemologies inimical to the gospel. It is doomed to failure because the presuppositionalist maintains the total depravity of humankind has so far destroyed the cognition of men and women that even when faced with solid evidence and reasoned arguments they will always interpret such data in light of their non-Christian worldview.

Worldviews are determinative, it is alleged; they are like a pair of mental glasses through which all facts are viewed and interpreted. As such, the presuppositionalist argues that “apologists ... should legitimately require the unbeliever to reason on Christian presuppositions.”⁵ He cannot persuade inductively from reason. Unbelievers and their attendant worldviews are necessarily inimical to the gospel. To employ reasoning that they might accept is to concede to the legitimacy of the worldview with which it is associated. There is no neutrality. To suggest there is willfully disobeys the call to bring every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.

This sort of epistemology leads to an apologetic whereby ones assumes and demands the unbeliever to assume what the

apologist attempts to demonstrate. Despite the obvious logical fallacy—the *petitio principii*—presuppositionalists demand such an approach. As a recently published apologetics textbook put it, the Christian answer to the unbeliever’s inquiry into why one should believe the articles of the Christian faith to be true should be “that ‘God says so.’ It is true because *God says so*. How do I know God says so? Because *he says he says so!*” One has to use the Bible to prove the truth of the Bible. “If the non-Christian insists that you cannot ... you need to explain that you really would not be consistent if you allowed some other authority to become the rule by which you judge God’s word.”⁶

The Issues

The issues raised over against positive apologetics revolve around the relationship between faith and reason or, more precisely, epistemology. Those who object to positive apologetics on the above grounds usually do so, it seems, because they do not (perhaps cannot) distinguish between epistemology and soteriology. This results in what is often termed fideism, an epistemology that is content with justifying or defending knowledge—at least certain fields of knowledge—by appealing only to faith. Alvin Plantinga describes it as an “exclusive or basic reliance upon faith alone, accompanied by a consequent disparagement of

reason and utilized especially in the pursuit of philosophical or religious truth.”⁷

Fideism is highly problematic. For one, it at least implicitly rejects the correspondence theory of truth, which says there is a real world of facts—present and historical—that exists outside of us, and that in this real world things are as they are regardless of whether we perceive or believe in them or not. Fideism pays no heed nor attempts to give any epistemic justification or apologetic (apart from the claim to faith) for why one holds something to be the case. When applied to Christianity it effectively reduces it to a cult of private belief and religious experience that stands on the same epistemological ground as all other religions.

There have always been fideists of some sort or another in the history of Christian thought. Where it became especially widespread was in the period of late modernity when the church found itself incapable of standing up to the rising tide of naturalism. So it began to separate itself from the world. Soon a sort-of cognitively dissonant view of the world emerged that said there was a world of fact available and knowable to all regardless of religious disposition. Only on the fringe, available only to the indoctrinated, existed a private world of values. Religion and its attendant historical narrative (such as the resurrection

of Jesus) belonged “exclusively to the private world.”⁸ One could believe in such religious values if they wished, but they were, at best, unknowable events and, at worst, tantamount to superstitious beliefs. When this move was made and Christians began to concede to this split, the confession of classic creedal Christianity, which saw (and sees) the events of Jesus life (even the miraculous events) as happening in real empirical history (“under Pontius Pilate”), increasingly found itself walled off from the world in a self-imposed confessional ghetto.

Resistance to Positive Apologetics

In many ways we are still there. A strong positive apologetic could work towards remedying this, but there is a lot of resistance towards it. It is especially seen in postmodern theologies that strive to justify the church’s existence while at the same time dismissing apologetics. The arguments are multifaceted and appear in numerous publications. Perhaps the most focused (and earliest) was advanced by Philip Kenneson in *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World*. Contemporary Christians are in postmodern times, in his view, absolved of contending for the truthfulness of the Gospel. “Christians need not continue to answer ‘the truth question,’” for truth is recognized as a relative term.⁹ For Kenneson, what is regarded

as true can only be true if it somehow connects (or is related) to a “web of convictions, beliefs and practices” already in place that determines what is true or false, and not the other way around.

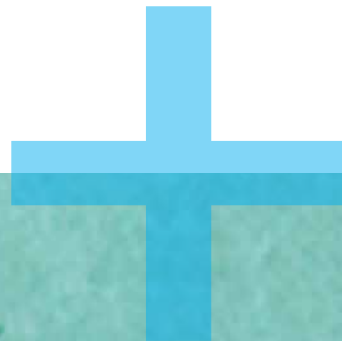
A positive, fact-based apologetic is ill-equipped to meet the postmodern challenges of the day. Beginning in alleged neutral territory (e.g., in the realm of history) with unbelief and, then, building a demonstrable case for the truthfulness of Christianity, adopts “Enlightenment optimism about the role of ... reason in the recognition of truth.”¹⁰ Truth—especially metaphysical or theological truth—really cannot be known. It can only be believed. Or as James Smith boldly puts it, “We can’t *know* that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. The best we can do is *believe*.”¹¹ And all the church and Christians can or should do is proclaim its beliefs. Of course the church should proclaim the gospel. No one would dispute this. The problem is that it confuses apologetics with proclamation.

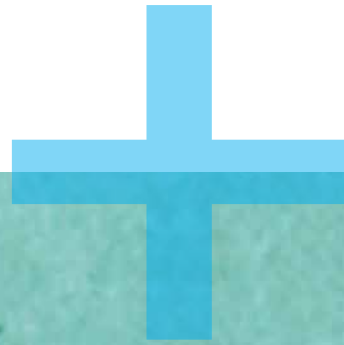
This isn’t just Smith’s postmodern position though. It is also expressed in Pieper when he described the assertion, “The best apology of the Christian religion is its proclamation,” as axiomatic.¹² This seems to be the position of much of confessional Lutheranism, too. All that is needed is the proclamation of law

and gospel. “Unbelief,” writes David Scaer, “is dissipated by the Gospel only after the Law has been preached.” It is not “removed by the alleged attractive rationality of Christianity.” While apologetics can be used in a negative fashion, to address those attempting to “destroy faith among believers or to hinder those who are approaching the church,” it cannot be used positively or persuasively. To do so, that is attempting to persuade others of the historical revelation of God in Christ, teeters on “the error of Rationalism.”¹³

Needed: Positive Apologetics

But what if the preaching of Christianity which hinges on an historical person and event (see 1 Corinthians 15:1-19) is largely regarded as a culturally perpetuated myth or even the product of some ancient theological and political conspiracy? In other words, what if the historical events of the gospel—that Jesus died on a cross while Pontius Pilate was prefect of Judea and rose again from the dead three days later—is regarded as untrue? There’s a whole host of material available for mass consumption and enjoyed by popular culture—from Dan Brown’s conspiracy theories to new atheist literature to the popular works of Bart Ehrman, Elaine Pagels, et al.—that sanction this. Add to this the influx of new and exotic





world religions and their competing claims, naturalism and the ideology of scientism, as well as the relativism and agnosticism of postmodernism all taking root in what many call the post-church culture of America, it seems that the need for an apologetic that takes Christianity on the offense is obvious. To see ourselves as absolved of the apologetic task is suicidal. J.P. Moreland said it well:

[P]ostmodernism is a form of intellectual pacifism that, at the end of the day, recommends backgammon while the barbarians are at the gate. It is the easy cowardly way out that removes the pressure to engage alternative conceptual schemes, to be different, to risk ridicule, to take a stand outside the gate. But it is precisely as disciples of Christ, even more, as officers in his army, that the pacifist way out is simply not an option. However comforting it may be, postmodernism is the cure that kills the patient, the military strategy that concedes defeat before the first shot is fired, the ideology that undermines its own claims to allegiance. And it is an immoral, coward's way out that is not worthy of a movement born out of the martyr's blood.¹⁴

The same goes for fideism, too. Though it is often dressed up in pious clichés, it is just as self-defeating as recent trends in postmodernism, for it leaves the church in a theological ghetto with words that ring hollow before the unbelieving world. None of this is to suggest that apologetics is a cure-all for evangelism. But for a world that largely and increasingly sees Christianity as a first-century myth perpetuated by the remnant of traditional western culture, apologetics works towards demonstrating that what we confess is not a cleverly or culturally disguised myth, but it is in fact what God himself did in real historical time and space for us and for the world. In short, along with preaching and everything else the church does, apologetics works to advance the gospel.



Notes

- 1 See John Warwick Montgomery, *Tractatus Logico-Theologicus* (Bonn: VKW, 2002).
- 2 See, among others, Montgomery, "Lutheranism and the Defense of the Faith," *The Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 11 (Fall 1970): 1-45; "The Incarnate Christ: The Apologetic Thrust of Lutheran Theology," *Modern Reformation* 7 (Jan/Feb.1998): 8-12.
- 3 Montgomery, "The Apologetic Thrust of Lutheran Theology," 15.
- 4 John Warwick Montgomery, "Christian Apologetics in the Light of the Lutheran Confessions," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 42 (July 1978): 264.
- 5 John Frame, "Presuppositional Apologetics," in *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. Stanly N. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 218.
- 6 Richard B. Ramsay, *The Certainty of the Faith: Apologetics in an Uncertain World* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2007), 150, 166.
- 7 Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 87.
- 8 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 49.
- 9 Phillip Kenneson, "There's No Such Thing as Objective Truth, and It's a Good Thing," in *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World*, ed. Timothy Phillips and Dennis Okholm (Downer's Grove: IVP, 1995), 161.
- 10 James Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 28.
- 11 Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* 119.
- 12 Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 1:109.
- 13 David P. Scaer, "Apologetics as Theological Discipline: Reflections on a Necessary and Biblical Task," in *Let Christ be Christ: Theology, Ethics, & World Religions in the Two Kingdoms*, ed. Daniel N. Harmelink (Huntington Beach: Tentatio Press, 1999), 302.
- 14 J.P. Moreland, "Postmodernism and Truth," in *Reasons for Faith: Making a Case for the Christian Faith*, ed. Norman L. Geisler and Chad V. Meister (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2007), 126.

book reviews

Orthodoxy.

Gilbert K. Chesterton. Stilwell,
Kansas: Digireads.com
Publishing, c. 2005.

Don't let the copyright date deceive; the book's original publishing date was 1908. Lest the publishing date deceive, its content are 21st century material, and its currency suggests that the 2005 date is in error. In an educational journal, it is not "politically correct" to mention that Chesterton never went to a school of higher education.

But his work could encourage young Christians who are frustrated by denominational apologetics; for example, polemics against all other Lutherans or Christian denominations fighting among themselves. They and others can find Chesterton to be a breath of fresh air who equips them to address a culture prophetically identified over a century ago. Chesterton's reminder is: "Should anyone ask you the reason for this hope of yours, be ever ready to reply, but speak gently and respectfully ... keep your conscience clear so that, whenever you are defamed, those who libel your way of life in Christ may be ashamed" (1 Peter 3:15-17, NAB).

Chesterton was well aware of denominational polemics and apologetics. Though standing in the Western Catholic tradition, he sought a common ground upon which all Christians could stand as they addressed the world, the Apostles Creed. *Orthodoxy* is the companion book to his *Heretics* which analyzed

and critiqued the intellectual and cultural world antithetical to Christianity. Along with Chesterton's *Everlasting Man*, we have a vibrant challenge to the secular culture, a culture C.S. Lewis opposed and who embraced the Christian response Chesterton offered.

While much energy is still spent on "Wine, Women, and Song" among Lutherans, our readiness and preparedness to engage the intellectual world around us languishes in contrast. *Orthodoxy* is what a renewal of Apologetics should be all about. Chesterton's work is a kind of "romantic" turn-around. Imagine a traveler who exits England to a new world, is unknowingly reversed at sea, and then returns home, imagining it as a "new world" to explore. Casting aside intellectual views that were suspect and sorting out truths sustainable, he assembles a truth worth dying for, even if outnumbered by all the intellects around him. By turning to himself, Chesterton discovers that he is in the great company of saints who have gone before, a cloud of witnesses (Hebrews 12:1).

As in *Everlasting Man*, Chesterton is ready to challenge popular philosophies, such as Eastern mysticism, materialism, evolution, progressivism, a "world come of age" (Dietrich Bonhoeffer), and "New Age." Chesterton's analyses parallel

our times, lacking only current nomenclature. Current topics, such as the nature of marriage, abortion, and the role of government in civil life, were normal topics for Chesterton. He takes up the doctrine of original sin, not as a doctrine *per se*, but as an empirical fact of humanity, doing so long before Barth or Niebuhr, a view which was palatably reinforced by C. Schulz's "Peanuts," originally titled as "little people." Chesterton would confront the "I'm OK; You're OK" supporters, the "Positive Self-Image" advocates, and Social Darwinians.

Some contemporary voices in educational psychology could reevaluate their view of humankind after hearing out Chesterton.

Chesterton engaged in vigorous debates with forerunners of contemporary voices, such as George Bernard Shaw, H.G. Wells, Bertrand Russell, and Clarence Darrow. His ideological opponents were materialism, scientific determinism, moral relativism, and spineless agnosticism (Dahl Alquist). Not surprisingly, his opponents who championed skepticism, relativism, not absolutes, socialism, not democracy, are remembered while Chesterton is forgotten.

But he is not an author to be overlooked. Celebrants of his writings include Ernest Hemingway, Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, Jorge Luis

Borges, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Karel Capek, Marshall McLuhan, Paul Claudel, Dorothy L. Sayers, Agatha Christie, Sigrid Undset, Ronald Knox, Kingsley Amis, W.H. Auden, Anthony Burgess, E.F. Schumacher, Neil Gaiman, Orson Welles, and others. They would concur that a “read” of *Orthodoxy* deserves a following.

The timeless nature of Chesterton is seen in his open critique of socialism and radical capitalism. He authored more than 200 short stories, including a popular series featuring the priest-detective, Father Brown, 30 years of weekly columns in the illustrated *London News* and *Daily News*, while editing his own *G.K.’s Weekly* for 11 years. Chesterton would have been unflappable before a Bishop John Selby Spong who was recently featured as the Easter-morning speaker at a community church (unbounded by any creed, let alone the *Apostles*, but eager for “new-speak” as current as Schleiermacher or atheist Bart Ehrmann).

Chesterton is not a bedtime read, since he writes chapters/paragraphs in one sentence. Perhaps one should read Chesterton “out-loud” only among listeners who can “walk and chew gum” at the same time.

To learn more of Chesterton see: www.chesterton.org/discover/lectures or www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/1807543-orthodoxy

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Mere Apologetics: How to Help Seekers & Skeptics Find Faith.

Alister E. McGrath. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012.

McGrath is being modest. This volume is well beyond “mere.” While the text is only 185 pages, plus notes, the author sharply and succinctly covers every issue that needs to be addressed in an introduction to apologetics. He is well qualified to do so. McGrath is not only an established theologian and writer; he also serves as the president of the Oxford Center for Christian Apologetics in London. He writes this volume on the basis of a solid base of finely honed theology and many years of practicing and teaching apologetics.

The introductory matters of definition of apologetics and its relationship to evangelism are well handled. While noting that the line between apologetics and evangelism is sometimes “fuzzy,” McGrath is clear that they have different goals. Apologetics does not aim to convert. It seeks to create an environment in which the saving news of the Gospel can be clearly heard. In McGrath’s words, “Apologetics clears the ground for evangelism, just as John the Baptist prepared the way for the coming of Jesus of Nazareth.” “Apologetics is not evangelism, and is inadequate without it.” Apologetics basically has three tasks: “1. [Identify] and [respond] to

objections or difficulties concerning the gospel 2. [Communicate] the excitement and wonder of the Christian faith ... 3. [Translate] the core ideas of the Christian faith into language that makes sense to outsiders.” The goal is to take away barriers to hearing the message of the Gospel and to clearly and winsomely attract a hearing of the Good News. Apologetics serves the needs of both believers and those who don’t yet have a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. One of many strengths of the book and McGrath’s approach is that he clearly understands and explains that while the rational defense of the faith is still necessary, the shift in culture from modern to postmodern means that this classic methodology alone will not address the range of hearers in the postmodern world. While some need to have a rational ground for giving the Gospel a hearing, many others will only be persuaded by appeals from affect and experience. Credibility for postmodern audiences is based as much on the existential workability of the faith as on its claims to truth.

Consequently, McGrath advises that the postmodern apologist needs to create a hearing for the Gospel by citing a broad range of clues from

book reviews

hearers' general lived experience that together persuade the hearer that the Gospel is worthy of a fair hearing. Such clues include persuasion that "the universe came into being fine-tuned for life," that the Christian faith offers a credible explanation for why science works, that morality is dependent upon an absolute Being, that the human heart has a longing for meaning and significance that can only be satisfied in God, that the beauty of the world points to a transcendent source of beauty, and that the universal experience of hope for eternal life must be grounded in its reality. McGrath does not argue that such appeals prove the existence of God or the truthfulness of the Gospel, but that taken together they build a strong case for giving the Christian worldview a credible hearing. McGrath contends that no other religious or philosophical worldview better accounts for the average person's experience of life. Thus, the Christian faith with its unique message of salvation in Jesus Christ can be plausibly and responsibly considered.

McGrath not only spells out a sound rationale for postmodern apologetics; he also gives a thorough description of a variety of practical ways to implement apologetics and

helpfully illustrates them with real life examples. In the end, he is persuasive that apologetics is as much an art as a science that is learned in the laboratory of life experience. Each believer must discover the gifts God has uniquely given him/her for helping people to accurately hear the Gospel and then enthusiastically, sensitively, winsomely apply them with the help of God's Spirit. This effort is crucial because there is nothing "mere" about the Gospel. It is the only message that saves sinners and helps them make sense of their lives.

The sensitivity, clarity and winsomeness of McGrath's presentation make it worthy of a fair and thorough hearing by all interested in apologetics.

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The End of Apologetics: Christian Witness in a Postmodern Context.

Myron Bradley Penner. Grand Rapids: IVP Press, 2013.

Myron Penner takes a challenging look at apologetics in a postmodern context. He raises the question of whether the fragmentation of modernity into postmodernism may require a return to a form of witness illustrated by early Christianity based on the revelation of the Gospel and personal conviction as shown in our lives. Penner is not saying that all apologetics has no value, and he freely quotes from C.S. Lewis. He believes that much of modern apologetics has lost its way immersing itself in modernity and therefore has little value in the postmodern world.

Penner contends that contemporary apologetics comes directly out of the modern "mind set" and its way of understanding the world and its problems. With this worldview, belief must be shown as rational to be accepted. Such a perspective is in contrast to the early Christian apologists who saw theology not as a set of rational principles, but as a connection to a way of living that embodied the truth of the Gospel.

The foundational principles of Penner's presentation are based on a Kierkegaardian approach to apologetics. He especially relates to Kierkegaard's identifying the difference between "genius" and

“apostle.” Modernism places reason alone as the source and ground of truth. The “genius” rules over all. The “apostle,” on the other hand, is chosen and called by God regardless of intellect, and has a message from God whether it is seen as rational or not. This message brings with it the power of God to save and change lives. The “apostle” appeals to revelation and not to reason. His message is one that no one else can improve or supplement because it is dependent on God’s action alone. This message is personal, and comes to each person in the context of his or her narrative.

In the pre-modern apologetic, reliance on God puts the source of belief outside of oneself, and therefore values such as truth and meaning are founded on revelation. The only absolute timeless truth is God’s alone. We therefore do not possess truth; truth possesses us. The truth of the Christian witness is not just in speaking the truth, but also living it, witnessing with our lives to the truth that possesses us.

Penner affirms that Christianity has nothing to fear from the “genius” simply because faith is not based on rationally justifying our beliefs before we accept them. He encourages a shift

to a hermeneutical approach to the Christian faith, understanding faith from the perspective of the text and traditions in which we hear the apostles and prophets speaking. It is there that we hear the prophetic witness that will show itself as a spiritual activity that is itself an expressing of faith that expresses itself in an ethic of belief and not just an epistemology.

He also desires to move the reader past the modern split between objective and subjective truth by showing that the Christian’s witness starts with his life. Within the postmodern paradigm, the truth I proclaim as true to me will be evident in how I live. This makes the act of witnessing more of a confession of personal conviction than as presenting a logical argument to the truth of a proposition. The statement of action and the statement of speaking are both critical parts of the Christian witness to the postmodern world. As a witness, I proclaim the truth that possesses my life with my actions and my lips.

This book has value to those who struggle with the inadequacies of the apologetic process. It also is of value to those seeking to find insights for witnessing in the postmodern world.

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