

THE REBIRTH OF APOLOGETICS

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Over the centuries, Christian theology has exerted itself to keep the proper balance. Faith, besides being a gracious gift of God, is also a free and responsible decision on the part of the believer. God's grace does not circumvent or suppress our native powers, but guides them so that they may act more perfectly. The believer has motives for believing that would not be present were it not for the light of grace. In his great encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, Pope John Paul II repeatedly declares that faith, by sharpening the inner eye of the mind, enables reason to rise above itself and in no sense diminishes it. Reinforcing reason, faith enables it to transcend its normal limits.

Faith, therefore, is not a simple achievement of reason. It is the work of reason submitting to the word of God, which comes by way of revelation. God, as the infinite source of all that is or can be, lies immeasurably beyond all that we can infer from the created order. His inner essence and intentions are known only to Himself unless He chooses to reveal them. For our sakes He has revealed something of Himself and His saving plans so that we may love and serve Him better. God's great and unsurpassable revelation of Himself is His Son, His eternal Word, who has become flesh in Jesus Christ. The Christian clings to that living and incarnate Word, in whom salvation is to be found.

In this framework we may consider the task of apologetics, the rational defense of faith. Apologetics cannot and should not attempt to demonstrate the truth of the mysteries of faith, which, as I have said, lie beyond human investigation and are believed on the strength of God's word, more certain than any logical deduction. But in order to believe we must find reasons for judging that what purports to be God's word really is his word. To spell out these reasons in a systematic way is the task of apologetics.

Jesus in his life on earth gave reasons for believing in him. He pointed to his wonderful deeds, which fulfilled the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament and were wrought by the power of God. Since the first Easter, Christians have regarded Christ's loving self-abasement on the Cross, followed by his glorious resurrection, as the preeminent sign of his divine Sonship. For the past two thousand years, apologists have contended that for those willing to ponder the evidence, the reasons for believing are more than adequate. They give ample assurance that it would be unreasonable to withhold assent.

Apologetics has to meet the adversaries of the faith where they are in each successive generation. In the first three centuries the literature was predominantly defensive: it sought to stave off persecution by convincing Roman officials that Christians were good citizens who obeyed the laws and prayed for the Emperor. In the next few centuries apologetics turned more aggressively to refute philosophers who claimed that Stoicism and Neoplatonism could provide all that was needed for a blessed life. Then in the Middle Ages Christian apologists increasingly directed their attention to Jews and Muslims, arguing that Jesus fulfilled the messianic prophecies of the Hebrew Bible, whereas Mohammed did not.

In early modern times apologetics took on fresh philosophical opponents. On the one hand, it sought to refute skeptics, who contended that reason could know nothing about God, the soul, and immortality; on the other hand, it responded to rationalists who maintained that human reason could prove so much about these realities that no revelation was needed.

In the nineteenth century Christian apologetics underwent still another shift. It responded to natural scientists and historical critics who attacked the reliability of the Bible on what they regarded as scientific and historical grounds. Apologists had to show that new discoveries concerning the antiquity of the universe and human origins did nothing to detract from God's role as Creator and that modern historical criticism did not invalidate the biblical record of God's revelatory deeds and words.

Toward the middle of the twentieth century apologetics, perhaps for the first time, acquired a bad name among Christians themselves. Thriving organizations such as the Catholic Evidence Guild and the Catholic Truth Society

suddenly vanished from the scene. Apologetics courses, which had been a mainstay of religious instruction in colleges and seminaries both Protestant and Catholic, disappeared from the curriculum. In their place a new discipline known as fundamental theology emerged. Unlike apologetics, fundamental theology did not try to speak to unbelievers but contented itself with analyzing for the sake of believers how God brings human beings to assent to His word.

Why did this sudden collapse occur? Four principal reasons may be offered. The unpopularity of apologetics arose, first of all, from its own excesses. Among many Christian thinkers apologetics threatened to absorb almost the whole of theology. In some cases it tried to prove too much, claiming to demonstrate by cogent arguments not only the credibility but the truth of Christian revelation. Meeting the scientific historians on their own ground, the Swiss Capuchin Hilarin Felder maintained that the Gospels are “in their full extent and in the strictest sense of the word, historical authorities and scientific evidence.” Then he concluded, to his own satisfaction, if not that of the reader, “Just as only that study of Christ which confesses the Messiahship and divinity of our Savior can lay claim to the spirit of Christianity, so only can such a study claim to follow a scientific method. Every christological conception which regards Jesus as a mere man is, if historically considered, a fanciful monstrosity.” Apologetics fell under suspicion for promising more than it could deliver and for manipulating the evidence to support the desired conclusions. It did not always escape the vice that Paul Tillich labeled “sacred dishonesty.”

A second defect was the tendency of apologists to revise Christian doctrine to make it more acceptable to the secular mind. Liberal Protestant theologians, abandoning the effort to prove the divinity of Christ, settled for a diluted version of the faith in which Christ was no more than a sublime ethical teacher who inculcated the love of God and neighbor. These apologists ceased to defend supernatural occurrences such as the virginal conception of Jesus, his miraculous deeds, and his glorious resurrection. Reacting against this retreat from orthodoxy, the great Swiss Protestant, Karl Barth, judged that apologetics by its very nature leads to compromise with unbelief. Apologists, he charged, seeking to make the gospel credible, marched onto the field carrying a white flag, and ended by surrendering essentials of the faith.

Barth’s criticisms contain a salutary warning. Some Catholic literature today practices a kind of doctrinal minimalism. Seeking to show how little one needs to believe, such apologetics gives the impression that belief is a burden rather than a privilege. If faith is to be trimmed back to the furthest limits, as this approach recommends, the reader begins to wonder why anyone should be asked to carry the incubus of faith at all?

A third temptation is for apologists to emphasize human activity at the expense of grace. They sometimes write as though we could reason ourselves into believing. Reacting against this distortion, some Protestants went to the opposite extreme. On the ground that human nature is totally corrupted by the Fall, they contended that it could play no role at all in the approach to faith. Giving a new interpretation to the doctrine of justification by faith alone, they dismissed apologetics as an effort of sinful human beings to justify themselves without grace. This exaltation of blind faith frequently goes hand in hand with a strong predestinationism. Choosing whom He wants to save, God infuses faith in some and leaves the rest of the human race to sink into perdition. In this fideist framework apologetics would be quite pointless. But Catholics, at least, will not follow this route because the Church teaches that God offers His grace to all but coerces none to believe. Faith, as I have said above, is a fully human act performed with the help of grace.

The recent unpopularity of apologetics does not stem exclusively from theological considerations such as the three already considered. Sociological factors are also at work. In a pluralist society like our own, religious faith is felt to be divisive. To avoid conflict Christians frequently take refuge in the excuse that people should be left free to make up their own minds about what to believe. After all, they say, no one can be argued into faith. Even to raise the question of truth in religion is considered impolite.

This withdrawal from controversy, though it seems to be kind and courteous, is insidious. Religion becomes marginalized to the degree that it no longer dares to raise its voice in public. This privatization has debilitating consequences for the faith of believers themselves. If we do not consider that it is important for others to hear the Christian proclamation, we inevitably begin to question its importance for ourselves. The result is a massive loss of

interest in religious teaching. The reluctance of believers to defend their faith has produced all too many fuzzyminded and listless Christians, who care very little about what is to be believed. Their halfhearted religion is far removed from that of the apostles and the martyrs. It is a degenerate offspring of authentic Christianity.

Recognizing that faith is enfeebled if its rational grounds are denied, committed Christians are today returning to apologetics. The titles of recent books register the change of climate. Not long ago it was typical to find books with titles such as *The Bankruptcy of Apologetics* (Willard L. Sperry), *Unapologetic Theology* (William C. Placher), and *Humble Apologetics* (John G. Stackhouse, Jr.), but today there are some refreshing alternatives. In 1990 Paul Griffiths published his carefully reasoned *An Apology for Apologetics* and in 2001 William A. Dembski and Jay Wesley Richards edited a collection of essays, *Unapologetic Apologetics: Meeting the Challenges of Theological Studies*. These two titles are indicative of a resurgence.

All over the United States there are signs of a revival. Evangelical Protestants are taking the lead. Apologists of the stature of Norman L. Geisler, William Lane Craig, and J. P. Moreland are publishing scholarly works on natural theology and Christian evidences. Unlike the liberal Protestants of an earlier vintage, these Evangelicals insist on orthodoxy; they uncompromisingly maintain the fundamental Christian doctrines of the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Atonement, and the bodily resurrection of Jesus. And their method succeeds. The churches that combine a concern for orthodoxy with vigorous apologetics are growing. Their seminaries attract large numbers of enthusiastic students.

A similar revival is occurring, albeit more slowly, in Catholic circles. Many of the leading proponents are converts from other Christian denominations, especially former Evangelicals. Peter Kreeft, at Boston College, plies an apologetics not far removed from that of the Evangelicals mentioned above. Scott Hahn and several colleagues at the Franciscan University of Steubenville, Ohio, confidently proclaim that the Protestant Bible points to the truth of the Catholic faith. EWTN, the network founded by Mother Angelica, broadcasts very successful programs of popular apologetics. Karl Keating, who runs the “Catholic Answers” institute in San Diego, has done much to stem the tide of Hispanics defecting to fundamentalist Protestant sects. There is also a renewal of interest in English Catholic converts of the last century, including G. K. Chesterton, Ronald Knox, and Arnold Lunn. Many recent converts are publishing their own stories of faith.

These efforts, to be sure, meet with some criticism from within the Catholic Church. The authors are accused of holding a propositional view of revelation, of proof-texting, and of triumphalism. The accusations must be weighed. If they come from a mentality that minimizes the doctrinal component of the faith or shrinks from any kind of confrontation, the criticisms should probably be discounted. Apologetics has to be somewhat controversial; it should forthrightly defend the settled teaching of the Church.

Contemporary apologetics uses a variety of methods. The so-called “classical approach” adheres to patterns familiar since the seventeenth century. First, it uses philosophy to prove the existence of God and the possibility of revelation; then it turns to historiography to vindicate the biblical record of sacred history and its culmination in Jesus Christ. This approach can be quite effective with readers who are adept in philosophy and who have some prior interest in Holy Scripture. But it must be practiced with discretion.

In natural theology care must be taken to build on the intuition of being that undergirds traditional metaphysics. If one tries to prove God’s existence by the methods of empirical science or purely conceptual logic, the proofs do not stand up under rigorous examination. In their handling of biblical evidences for revelation, some contemporary apologists, like their predecessors a century ago, seek to establish the historicity of the biblical miracles by objective historical method. I have no desire to fault the enterprise. Skeptical historians strive in vain to disprove the facts that Jesus claimed divinity for himself and rose corporeally from the dead. But the evidential approach cannot be expected to succeed with historians who practice their craft with agnostic or atheistic presuppositions. They will generally admit that Jesus existed and attracted some committed disciples through his preaching and wonderful deeds, but will protest that their method cannot say anything about the supernatural. They will give no serious consideration to the claims that Jesus was born of a virgin mother or that he left the tomb and ascended to heaven in his risen body. To overcome the objections raised by analytic philosophy and secular historiography, apologetics

needs to shift its ground. It must find a method by which people can be brought to affirm what they would otherwise dismiss as untenable.

Here, as in many other matters, Pope John Paul II has given timely leadership. Personalism, he believes, is the best medicine for awakening the world from its metaphysical slumber. He begins his arguments for the existence of God by reflecting not on the finitude, mutability, contingency, and order of the universe, as was traditionally done, but on the aspirations of the human heart for communion with the divine. In his view human beings are made for transcendent truth, and such truth turns out to be a person who says of himself, "I am the truth." The Church is a place in which human persons enter into communion with one another in Jesus Christ. The Pope thus presents an intersubjective or interpersonal version of Christianity that can be a very attractive alternative to readers who suffer from the anonymity of contemporary collectivism or the isolation of contemporary individualism.

In his program for the new evangelization as set forth in *Redemptoris Missio*, Pope John Paul II reminds his readers that the world today looks not so much for arguments as for witnesses "that is to say, for believers who will testify by word and deed to a Lord whom they have encountered in experiences of faith. "Belief," according to the Pope in *Fides et Ratio*, "is often humanly richer than mere evidence, because it involves an interpersonal relationship and brings into play not only a person's capacity to know but also the deeper capacity to entrust oneself to others, to enter into a relationship with them which is intimate and enduring." This emphasis on personal trust, I believe, holds great promise for the renewal of apologetics.

In recent centuries apologetics has concentrated mainly on how we get to God. It has relied on quasi-scientific methods of inquiry that owe more to Descartes, Locke, and Spinoza than to the prayerful searching of an Augustine, an Anselm, a Pascal, or a Newman. In a revealed religion such as Christianity, the key question is how God comes to us and opens up a world of meaning not accessible to human investigative powers.

The answer, I suggest, is testimony. Revelation, as God's word, is a form of divine testimony. Faith is by its nature an acceptance of the word of God, the witness who can neither deceive nor be deceived. God's word comes to us through human witnesses: the prophets and apostles, the inspired authors of Holy Scripture, and the tradition of the Church, which faithfully passes on and interprets what it has received from Christ and the apostles.

From its beginnings Christianity has been propagated through the living testimony of believers. The apostles were conscious of imparting a message that came from God. The Book of Revelation records the testimony of John, "who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ" (Revelation 1:2). Paul writes of himself and the other apostles, "We are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us." He congratulates the Thessalonians for receiving his teaching "not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God" (1 Thessalonians 2:13). Believers today have to rely likewise on testimony.

Personal testimony calls for an epistemology quite distinct from the scientific, as commonly understood. The scientist treats the datum to be investigated as a passive object to be mastered and brought within the investigator's intellectual horizons. Interpretations proffered by others are not accepted on authority but are tested by critical probing. But when we proceed by testimony, the situation is very different. The event is an interpersonal encounter, in which the witness plays an active role, making an impact upon us. Without in any way compelling us to believe, the witness calls for a free assent that involves personal respect and trust. To reject the message is to withhold confidence in the witness. To accept it is a trusting submission to the witness's authority. To the extent that we believe, we renounce our autonomy and willingly depend on the judgment of others.

The methods of apologetics outlined above "natural theology and history" are primarily scientific. As philosophers or historians we treat the datum as something impersonal to be brought within the compass of our own world of thought. This method is useful for confirming certain doctrines and refuting certain errors, but it rarely leads to conversion. Since the passage from unbelief to Christian faith involves conversion to a radically new outlook, testimony plays an indispensable role. Through the words of His witnesses God can bring us to affirm what we could not have discovered for ourselves.

To demonstrate that belief in religious testimony can be warranted, apologetics is required. It must present criteria for credibility. Some of the criteria have already been worked out in other disciplines. Historians, journalists, and juries regularly rely on witnesses. To avoid mistakes they have to devise tests of reliability. They look for witnesses who are in a position to know and who have no motive for deceiving others. They prefer early sources, as close as possible to the events, and those that rely on multiple independent witnesses.

Analogous criteria may be used in apologetics for evaluating religious testimony, such as that contained in Scripture. But the criteria used for academic history are not fully applicable. The biblical authors are not professional historians, concerned with reporting exactly what Jesus had said and done on this or that occasion. They are believers aiming to communicate the gospel and evoke faith in Christ the Savior. As we read at the conclusion of John's Gospel, "These words are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31).

It is difficult to devise criteria for evaluating religious testimony, but some rules of thumb may be proposed. I suggest the following five: convergence, firmness, novelty, transformation, and illuminative power.

In the first place, the New Testament testimony is early, multiple, and convergent. The Evangelists come from different communities and give different perspectives on the life of Christ, yet they agree on substantial. The New Testament contains many theologies but only one vision of Christ and the Christian life. All the accounts present Jesus as the Son who speaks and acts with sovereign majesty, who lays down his life for the redemption of the world, and who rises triumphant from the grave. They agree that he held forth a revolutionary ideal of human life, exalting poverty, humility, love of neighbor, and patience in suffering as the way to eternal salvation.

Second, the authors do not speak as inquirers trying to fathom the purposes of God by human speculation but rather as witnesses to a truth that has come to them with the strength of a revelation. Accepting what they have been taught as the word of God, they proclaim it with unwavering assurance. The firmness of their conviction is an indication that God has spoken to them with proofs of power.

Third, the message they proclaim is one that they would not have accepted had it not been for a visitation from on high. As pious Jews they had held that Yahweh alone was God and that no human being could be divine. But now, after encountering Jesus, they pay him divine honors, call upon him as Lord and God, and worship him as the equal of the Father. Apart from revelation, what could have convinced them that a lowly Galilean carpenter was Lord of the universe?

Fourth, the apostles and their associates were transformed by the message they proclaimed. They did not take possession of it, but were possessed by it. From timid disciples, anxiously bolting the doors of the Upper Room, they became apostles openly proclaiming their faith at the risk of imprisonment, scourging, and martyrdom. No external opposition can keep them from speaking of what they have seen and heard. Their extraordinary dynamism is evidence of God's transforming power.

Fifth, the qualities of the message are such as would befit a revelation. It provides clues to the riddles of suffering and death that no human philosophy could provide. It gives hope to those who, humanly speaking, have nothing to hope for; it offers means of forgiveness to sinners stuck in a morass of guilt. Overturning the barriers between nation and nation and the hostility between different races and ethnic groups, the gospel promotes a civilization of universal peace and love.

The content of the message is no less remarkable. It presents the image of Jesus, the incarnate Lord who speaks and acts with unprecedented authority, confounding his enemies but showing mercy to repentant sinners and compassion for the weak and the outcast. Rejected by his own, he willingly lays down his life. Praying for his executioners, he dies naked and abandoned on the Cross, only to be taken up into glory by the Father. The story of Jesus, vivid in its details and majestic in its pattern, surpasses human powers of invention. It is so captivating that some have taken it as evidence of its own truth.

The figure of Jesus is even more impressive when seen in the perspective of salvation history. He arrives on the scene at the conclusion of a thousand years of prophetic literature that looked forward in hope to the advent of a Redeemer. The faith aroused by Jesus has persisted for two thousand years, winning adherents of vast numbers from every land and nation. The Christian community continues to be a vital force in the world. In spite of the human weakness of her members, the Church is a sign, a sacrament filled with Christ's presence, an enduring witness to her own divine origin.

How, then, does an apologetics of committed religious testimony compare with other methods, such as the classical approach through natural theology and the evidential approach that appeals to scientific history? Testimony, as I have explained it, has an interpersonal character. The witness addresses us actively, placing us in the position of recipients who must seek to understand. Personal address can surprise and challenge us, furnish us with new categories, and thus dispose us for conversion. To the extent that we open ourselves up to testimony, we learn to rely on trustworthy witnesses and submit to their authority. This fiducial attitude prepares us for religious conversion as a personal submission to the divine witness who speaks to us in Christ.

While I applaud the resurgence of apologetics that we have recently seen in this country, I suggest it could benefit from the kind of personalism that Pope John Paul II professes. I have for some years been advocating an apologetics of religious testimony. It could capitalize on the personalist categories with which Christian philosophers such as Gabriel Marcel have familiarized us: testimony, invitation, response, engagement, fidelity, and communion. These categories attune us to biblical thinking and especially to the Gospels as documents of faith.

The apologetics of personal testimony is particularly suited to the genius of Catholicism. In the act of Catholic faith, reliance on testimony goes out indivisibly to Christ and to the Church through which he continues his mission in the world. Such testimony invites us not only to individual conversion but to communion with the whole body of believers.

Recent popes have been calling the Catholic Church to a new evangelization. To evangelize, we must allow the testimony of God, of the apostles, and of the Church to speak through us. This we cannot do with confidence and success unless we have assured ourselves that the testimony is credible and unless we are able to convince others that this is the case. Holy Scripture instructs us not to neglect apologetics. "Always be prepared," says the First Letter of Peter, "to give a defense (*apologian*) of the hope that is in you" (1 Peter 3:15). If we love Christ and cherish our faith, and if we wish to spread its saving influence, we will not shirk this important responsibility. The time is ripe, the need is urgent, for a rebirth of apologetics.

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