Jews, Pagans, Sceptics and Emperors: Public Theology as Christian Apologetics

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Introduction

Westminster Abbey has announced that on 22 November this year, on the 50th anniversary of his death, the writer and literary scholar C.S. Lewis will be honoured by a commemorative plaque taking his place alongside many other novelist, poets and writers. Paying tribute, Vernon White, Canon Theologian, said that Lewis was an "extraordinarily imaginative and rigorous thinker and writer", and someone who was "able to convey the Christian faith in a way that made it both credible and attractive to a wide range of people". Indeed, Lewis is hailed as one of the leading Christian apologists of the twentieth century – and of course he earned that reputation not only through his popular works on theology and theodicy such as Mere Christianity and Surprised by Joy but his fiction, most especially The Screwtape Letters and of course The Chronicles of Narnia – although I would personally like to recommend, if you’re interested, that you investigate his Martian Trilogy of science-fiction novels.

But this is a demonstration, I think, of the enduring potential of literature and the creative arts as vehicles of Christian apologetics (defined as ‘the various ways in which thoughtful Christians, in

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different ages and cultures, have striven to “give a reason for the hope that is within them” (cf 1 Peter 3:15)’ (Dulles, 1971, xix). But given that Lewis will also be commemorated in this building, at the heart of the public and political life of the nation, I am also prompted to consider the significance of Christian apologetics in another sphere of life: that of public theology (about which I shall say more in a moment). It’s my contention that given the status of religion in the public domain in the contemporary West, in which the practices and discourses of faith are both newly prominent and enduringly contested, any justification on the part of the Christian churches to intervene in public debate has to be increasingly transparent, self-reflexive – and apologetic. In other words, the proponents of public theology – who might range from Church authorities, public intellectuals to local activists and campaigners – should contribute critically and constructively to public debate and be more attentive than ever to the tasks of justifying and articulating the theological basis of their commitments. Why this might be will form the first part of my discussion.

But then, I want to think a little bit more about the nature of Christian apologetics, arguing that it has always needed to be sensitive to its changing contexts and interlocutors. However, much of contemporary apologetics, or ‘the attempt to defend a particular belief or system of beliefs against objections’ (Beilby 2011, 11), is often focused around the debating of propositional and abstract doctrines concerning the existence of God and the historicity of the resurrection; and I am not convinced that this is true either to its own historical legacy or to contemporary demands. For example, it is clear that some of the most significant and foundational events and texts of early Christianity were apologetic in nature. But they were often also quintessentially pieces of public theology in that not only were they conducted in public assemblies, religious or civic, subjecting themselves to universal scrutiny, but they were also often petitions directed at the political authorities, and concerned the relationship of Christians to imperial and secular authority
as well as matters of doctrine. So there is a sense in which apologetics has always been public and about more than an exposition of belief. It is also a commendation of the public virtues of Christian faith.

A recent collection of essays, entitled *Imaginative Apologetics*, argues that in fact today it is through the media of culture, literature, art and science that Christians should be defending and justifying their faith (Davison, 2011). This also opens up the possibility of apologetics as mediated through performative and aesthetic means. The problem is, that this volume contains no reference to anything resembling public theology, defined as Christian engagement in and commentary upon matters such as economics, civil society, media or politics. So I want to close with some concluding thoughts on what it might mean for public theology to recover a greater purpose as a form of Christian apologetics: in the practical cultivation of positive virtues of citizenship premised on justice, conviction and concern for the common good.

‘Post-Secular Public Theology’

My interests in the future of public theology are prompted by a consideration of the changing role of religion in the contemporary West, and in particular the way in which our everyday experience may no longer fit comfortably into existing analytical paradigms. Chief amongst these paradigms, of course, since 1960s, has been that of the secularization thesis, which argues that as Western society becomes more modern, more complex, it also becomes more ‘secular’. Conventional secularization theories hold that as societies modernise, so they become less ‘religious’ according to a number of criteria: in terms of personal affiliation and belief; in terms of institutional strength
of religious organisations; and in terms of the political and cultural prominence of religion in society.

Associated with this, and originating in the religious wars of early modernity and the democratic revolutions of C18th, is the idea that the modern democratic state must effect a separation between religion and government, between ‘faith’ and ‘reason’. This is associated with liberal thinkers such as John Rawls, whose *Theory of Justice* argued that equality of participation amongst citizens in the public domain was dependent on everyone ‘bracketing out’ matters of personal or subjective conviction – such as religious faith – on the grounds that these represented partial and partisan forms of reasoning, not universally accessible and therefore inadmissible as acceptable forms of political or moral reasoning. Hence, the separation of religion and politics, and the assumption that the modern democratic state will be functionally secular or at least neutral towards the manifestations of religion in public (Rawls, 1971); (Bedford-Strohm, 2007).

But since the 1990s, accelerating into the early C21st, new perspectives have been emerging. They argue that we are witnessing an unprecedented convergence of two supposedly incompatible trends: secularization and a new visibility of religion in politics and public affairs. Whilst many of the features of the trajectory of religious decline, typical of Western modernity, are still apparent, there are compelling and vibrant signs of religious revival, not least in public life and politics - local, national and global. This requires a revision of the classic secularization thesis, which predicted that religion would become increasingly irrelevant to society; and of much Western liberal political theory, which sets out separate or at least demarcated terms of engagement between religion and the public domain.
For example, in Western democracies such as the UK, faith-based organizations are experiencing a heightened public prominence as partners with government in the delivery of welfare and other public services (Dinham, Furbey and Lowndes, 2009). Religion continues to be a potent force in many aspects of global civil society and is increasingly cited by governments as a significant source of social capital and political mobilization. Interest in personal spirituality beyond creedal and institutional expressions of religion continues to be strong; and global migration has fostered religious diversity and heightened awareness of the links between religious commitment and cultural or ethnic identity. Within human rights legislation, the inclusion of categories of ‘religion and belief’ alongside markers of identity such as ‘race’ and ethnicity, gender, sexuality and dis/ability has given rise to a number of high-profile cases across Europe in which persons of faith have challenged the neutrality of the public square by insisting on special treatment – such as the wearing of particular religious clothing or symbols or demands for particular dispensations of practice and conscience – that are both novel and sometimes cut across other conventions of equality and diversity practice. [As in, for example, the various cases of evangelical Christians who have been suspended or disciplined by their employers for objecting to aspects of equal opportunities legislation on the grounds of religious conscience.] These cases reveal a potential conflict between respect for freedom of belief and recognition of universal rights and freedoms.

At the same time, however, levels of formal institutional affiliation and membership in mainstream denominations continue to decline. The 2011 Census shows a decline in those identifying themselves as Christian as falling from 2001 from nearly three-quarters to around two-thirds, whilst those claiming they have ‘no religion’ has risen to a quarter. According to other measures, such as recorded in the British Social Attitudes Survey, public scepticism towards religion is actually increasing (Voas and Ling, 2010). There is greater acceptance of those who profess no religious faith or declare themselves secular humanists. Religious observance is
increasingly disaffiliated and individualised; religious institutions are viewed with distrust at worst, indifference at best. For example, a YouGov poll on attitudes to religion in 2011 reported that:

40% of adults professed no religion, 55% were Christian and 5% of other faiths. Age made a major difference, with only 38% of the 18-34s being Christian and 53% having no religion; whereas for the over-55s the figures were 70% (Christian) and 26% (no religion) respectively.

79% agreed with the statement that religion is a cause of much misery and conflict in the world today; 11% disagreed

35% agreed that religion is a force for good in the world, but 45% disagreed. Dissentients being more numerous among men (50%) than women (41%).

The survey concluded,

“All in all, these data point to a society in which religion is increasingly in retreat and nominal. With the principal exception of the older age groups, many of those who claim some religious allegiance fail to underpin it by a belief in God or to translate it into regular prayer or attendance at a place of worship. People in general are more inclined to see the negative than the positive aspects of religion, and they certainly want to keep it well out of the political arena.” YouGov, 2011, ‘British Religion in Numbers’, available at http://www.brin.ac.uk/news/2011/yougovcambridge-on-religion.[accessed 24 November 2012]
We might also think of the popularity of works by so-called ‘new Atheist’ writers such as the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, philosophers such as Daniel Dennett and Sam Harris and journalists such as Polly Toynbee and the late Christopher Hitchens. Increasingly, when religious leaders speak about public issues, they find the very legitimacy of their right to speak is challenged. When political leaders speak of their personal faith, as German Chancellor Angela Merkel did at the end of last year, they negotiate a tricky passage from private conviction into public conviction, and such statements are often received as disingenuous or calculating (Graham, 2009a, 2009b). Similarly, the reception of Rowan Williams’ speech on shari’a law in February 2008, asking whether Muslim sharia law might receive some recognition within the British legal system, reminds us that religious leaders step into the public domain at their peril, especially when they are heard to suggest that religious groups might be granted differential rights within a secular state (Williams, 2012). An argument that modern democratic principles of human dignity were entirely compatible with parallel jurisdictions which acknowledge religiously-founded codes of conduct was too much, apparently, for most public commentators to contemplate.

So, at the very least, the secularization process is neither uniform, inevitable nor irreversible, since religion continues to exercise a global influence and is manifesting a new public prominence. But whilst the inevitability of secularization may now be open to question, however, there is no way we can call this a religious revival. Whatever is emerging is very different from what went before, not least because the conventions of secular liberalism continue to resist what they regard as the illegitimate incursions of faith into the neutral public square.
Following scholars such as Jürgen Habermas, Jose Casanova (2004) and Rosi Braidotti (Braidotti 2008); (Habermas, 2006, 2008), I have chosen to adopt the terminology of the ‘post-secular’, to denote this problematic and paradoxical co-existence of revitalized religious activism as a decisive force in public life, both globally and locally, on the one hand, alongside the continuing trajectory of organisational religious decline, accompanied by robust defence of secularism in Western societies. Jürgen Habermas’ recent work in particular has spearheaded this new turn in social theory and political philosophy, with his talk of the ‘post-secular’ as an expression of the newly prominent – and problematic – role of religion in the public square which represents a new departure from the classic assumptions of modern liberal thought towards the role of religion (Habermas, 2008; 2010; Mendieta and Vanantwerpen, 2011). Increasingly, political theorists of many kinds are asking questions about the self-sufficiency of the secular to furnish the public domain with sufficiently robust values for consensus. To that end, therefore, post-secular culture must openly recognize religion not as a set of private beliefs but as a source of public discourse.

What has raised the stakes about the post-secular, however, and highlights the need for greater communication, is the growing gulf between people of faith and wider society, in terms of a widespread deficit of religious literacy, and in the face of reasoned sceptics who question the very legitimacy of religious voices and the benevolence of faith-based interventions in equal measure. If modernity was characterised by a particular understanding of the public, rational sphere, one that insisted on its own neutrality and impartiality – and thus its own secularist agenda – what happens to our understandings of public life within the post-secular context? The new prominence of religion within a continuing trajectory of pluralism means that public discourse and public space becomes more differentiated but potentially more polarised, with a small but increasingly well-mobilised religious minority operating alongside a majority of disaffiliated non-
believers who may have little or no first-hand understanding of religious belief or practice. This has particular impact on the discourses and practices concerning citizenship and values informing the public sphere.

I’ve set myself the task of examining these issues through the lens of public theology. This is the study of the public relevance of religious thought and practice, normally within Christian tradition. It is both academic discipline and ecclesial discourse, in that it seeks to comment and critically reflect from a theological perspective on aspects of public life such as economics, politics, culture and media. Traditionally, public theology sees itself as rooted in religious traditions, but strongly in conversation with secular discourse and public institutions.

‘Public theologians thus seek to communicate, by means that are intelligible and assayable to all, how Christian beliefs and practices bear, both descriptively and prescriptively, on public life and the common good, and in so doing possibly persuade and move to action both Christians and non-Christians.’ (Breitenberg, 2003, p. 66).

Some public theologians examine actual examples of interventions into public debate or political procedures by churches or other faith-based organizations. Others undertake a critique of the ways in which theological language, concepts and values are mediated into public debate, such as the common good, salvation, covenant, Trinity. Occasionally, public theologians contribute to the normative and formative reconstruction of communities of faith as they seek to exercise a public ministry in relation to questions of ecology, global finance, poverty or urban life and faith. Contemporary public theologians are also diversifying increasingly beyond a focus on churches
and political processes, to consider the wider cultural significance of religious motifs, values and practice – such as the media and popular culture.

However, the particular challenges of the post-secular condition suggest that if the Christian churches are committed to any kind of significant public role, the nature of public theological discourse must change. No longer is it speaking into a common frame of reference, in which theological and moral allusions fall comfortably on waiting ears. Indeed, in a context where people’s familiarity with any kind of organized religion is ever more tenuous, it places greater onus than ever on the importance of significant communication across the post-secular divide. It is therefore my contention that this new dispensation of ‘post-secularity’ presents novel challenges for public theology and the public witness of the Christian churches. Public theology must learn to negotiate its way between the ‘rock’ of religious revival and the ‘hard place’ of secularism.

Hence my interest in its function as a form of Christian apologetics; and here, I have drawn on the work of the North American public theologian, Max Stackhouse. In common with other public theologians, Stackhouse’s vision of public theology rests on three particular convictions.

Firstly, religion is never simply a matter of personal or private devotion, but carries over into the believer’s life in all aspects of the public domain, such as economics, civil society, the State and culture. (Note, then, amongst other things, that ‘public’ is wider than merely ‘political’.) Secondly, if ‘public’ for Stackhouse is anathema to notions of a spiritualised, privatised faith for the individual, the corollary is an emphasis on the public significance of religion’s impact:
‘… theology, while related to intensely personal commitments and to a particular community of worship, is, at its most profound level, neither merely private nor a matter of distinctive communal identity. Rather, it is an argument regarding the way things are and ought to be, one decisive for public discourse and necessary to the guidance of individual souls, societies, and, indeed, the community of nations.’ (Stackhouse, 2006, p. 165)

Thirdly, in the face of alternative forms of theological fideism or confessionalism, Stackhouse insists that theology must be a fully public, dialogical discourse, in terms of being prepared to defend its core principles in public. Behind this lies a particular vision of God and of human nature made in the image of God:

‘From very early on one of the meanings of apologetics was that you enter into another person’s vocabulary and worldview as best you can, and the very fact that we can do that in some measure suggests that there is some deep contact between humans. Some profound creational theology is behind that: we are all children of God, whether everyone acknowledges it or not, and we can enter into one another’s vocabulary and begin to articulate the most profound things that we think are really true.’ (Stackhouse, 2001).

There are two dimensions to Stackhouse’s adoption of ‘apologetics’, therefore: one of dialogue, and one of persuasion. The first rests on his commitment to a shared realm of communicative reason and the collaborative task of forging a cohesive civil society; the second on the concern for theology to justify its right to be part of such a collaborative enterprise. If it will not bear the critical scrutiny of non-theological conversation partners, it cannot hope to contribute to the substantive work of public debate: ‘if a theology is to be trusted to participate in public discourse
it ought to be able to make a plausible case for what it advocates in terms that can be comprehended by those who are not believers ... It should be able to articulate its core convictions in comprehensible terms across many modes of discourse, explaining its symbolic and mythical terms ... in ways that expose their multiple levels of meaning.’ (2007: 112)

However, Stackhouse is also adamant that this is a mutual accountability, since by virtue of subjecting itself to dialogue, public theology is entitled to expect other disciplines to reciprocate. In the case of non-theological disciplines that do not, it may be ‘doubtful about the intellectual and moral integrity of any position or discipline that does not take theology into account.’ (Stackhouse, 2004, pp. 191, n. 2) This is an interesting observation, it seems to me, about the self-sufficiency or adequacy of a public discourse that is not prepared to take religious conviction seriously.

Such a commitment to a dialogical, transparent mode of theological reasoning is not universal within contemporary theology, however. Post-liberal theology, associated with writers such as George Lindbeck, George Stroup, Hans Frei and Stanley Hauerwas, and those associated with ‘Radical Orthodoxy’ – John Milbank, Graham Ward, Catherine Pickstock, Daniel Bell and Phillip Blond – are all dismissive of attempts to engage in constructive apologetics in a pluralist public realm. Such perspectives lament what they regard as the capitulation of contemporary theology (especially its liberal tendencies) to modernity, and seek to exercise alternative forms of Christian witness that will restore the cultural and theo-political primacy of Christendom. Hence, the public speaking of a theologian is sanctioned by its faithfulness to a distinctive ecclesial ethic, rather than a quest for public coherence or relevance. It seeks to defend the integrity and particularity of theology against a liberal apologetic strategy that seemed to privilege its
credibility in the eyes of Christianity’s ‘cultured despisers’ over its obedience to traditional
Christian orthodoxy. As George Stroup once observed, ‘Post-liberals are bound to be sceptical ... about apologetics.’ (Stroup, 1984, p. 129)

For those who would consider themselves Christian apologists, the term has come to denote a
justification by appeal to rational, propositional argument with a view to leading another to their
own profession of faith. ‘Christian apologetics is the scholarly reflection on Christian apologetic
witness and dialogue as the intellectual justification of the truth and relevance of the Christian
faith.’ (van den Toren 2011, 27) Whilst many apologists would acknowledge that Christian faith
comprises more than intellectual assent to theological propositions (Beilby 2011, 168-169), most
of this literature – dominated by conservative Evangelical perspectives – emphasises the rational
plausibility of Christian doctrine, which has led to an epistemological dominance of rationalist,
scientific and propositional proof-arguments. It tends to focus on personal conversion and belief,
at the expense of commending the role of Christianity in promoting responsible citizenship within
a shared public realm. But is this emphasis on propositional belief more consistent with evidence
from the history of Christian apologetics, or does it represent a narrowing of the historic
tradition?

**Apologetics and Christian Origins**

Christianity has from its very origins been a missionary faith, centred around the proclamation of
the life, death, resurrection and Lordship of Jesus Christ. From the very beginning, however, it
has also been charged with an apologetic task: defending and commending its claims against a
variety of non-believers, detractors and persecutors: Jews, pagans, sceptics and Emperors. The
first century epistle 1 Peter summarises this imperative as follows: *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).

Apologetics traditionally, then, has been seen as ‘the attempt to defend a particular belief or system of beliefs against objections.’ (Beilby 2011, 11) As Christian communities became established and dispersed around the Graeco-Roman world, so the challenges of interpreting and commending the faith to Jewish and pagan cultures became more pressing. Acts of the Apostles records how on the day of Pentecost, Peter’s sermon is addressed predominantly to a Jewish audience, and proclaims the significance of Jesus as Messiah, prophet of Israel and fulfilment of the Hebrew Scriptures (Acts 2:14-36) Acts 17 relates Paul’s journey to Thessalonica, where he preached in a synagogue, reasoning from the Jewish Scriptures and prophets. Despite not encountering any prior hostility, this is sufficient nevertheless to provoke a backlash (Acts 17:1-9). Later, in Athens, Paul visits the synagogue, but concentrates on debating with pagan philosophers at the Areopagus, where he preaches the Gospel as the fulfilment of extant hidden wisdom (Acts 17:16-34). Similarly, in Acts 24: 10-21, whilst in Caesarea, Paul has to defend himself against the charges brought against him by the orator Tertullus (Acts 24:1-8), who accuses him of causing breaches of the peace through his preaching. Paul’s response follows the patterns of Roman legal convention, appealing not only to Jewish tradition and the Scriptures but to Roman rules of evidence.

As well as its Scriptural, religious and philosophical dimensions, then, apologetics has also had a civil, legal dimension. An *apologia* was also the summary speech for the defence in a court of law in the face of persecution by the Roman authorities denoting an answer or defence given in response to an accusation. The appellation ‘Christian’ (*Christianos*) is only established around
time of Ignatius (early C2nd C.E.) and it is a Latinism transliterated into Greek. This would suggest it was coined by Roman officials in their dealings with members of this new cult, specifically in trials and legal actions against them.

Apologetics, then, is a history of the way successive Christian generations have defended and commended the foundations of their faith – including to the public authorities. From the beginning, this arose in response to a variety of needs. In his *History of Apologetics* first published in 1971, Avery Dulles groups Christian apologetics into three main genres, depending on the context and intended audience. ‘Religious apologists’ argued for the superiority of the gospel over other religious or philosophical systems; ‘internal apologists’ were concerned to correct error or heresy within the Christian community itself; but a third group, which Dulles terms ‘political apologists’ developed their arguments in order to secure civil toleration of Christianity in the face of state persecution (Dulles, 1971: xx).

*Truth to Power: Apologetics in the Patristic Era*

Whilst ‘apologist’ may be of modern provenance, the term ‘apology’ appears to have originated with the early C4th writer Eusebius of Caesarea, to denote works addressed to the Roman Emperor. By this definition, that means Tertullian, Athenagoras, Quadratus, Aristedes and Justin, all from this period, qualify as ‘apologists’ or writers of apologies that were not addressed to fellow Christians (such as 1 Peter) or simply to peers, such as philosophers or pagan believers, but were directed at the public authorities. Oskar Skarsaune (2010) argues that this tradition is
pioneered by Justin Martyr’s first and second *Apology*, dating from the mid-C2nd, and effectively comes to an end with Tertullian. As Skarsaune notes, these were therefore justifications for the Christian faith that reached beyond the Church itself to the wider society – furthermore, to the highest Imperial powers of all.

The basis of the argument was philosophical in nature, as a defence of the logical coherence of the faith. Nevertheless, the substance of the apology concerned the public position of Christians, protesting against the injustice of the legal charges levelled against them. Justin pleads for an end to the prosecution of Christians who, it would seem, are being indicted simply for their beliefs, and not for any legal offence or political disloyalty. As Skarsaune argues, therefore, such apologies were effectively a ‘petition’ to the Emperor (2010: 123). The opening paragraph of Justin’s first Apology illustrates this well: the imperial leadership are addressed as men of learning, certainly; but in appealing to them in concert with other civil powers, and in introducing his own patrimony as a representative of all the ‘nations’ who suffer persecution, Justin cements together the political and philosophical dimensions of his defence:

‘To the Emperor Titus Aelius Adrianus Antoninus Pius Augustus Caesar, and to his son Verissimus the philosopher, and to Lucius the philosopher, the natural son of Caesar, and the adopted son of Pius, a lover of learning, and to the sacred senate, with the whole people of the Romans, I, Justin, son of Priscus and grandson of Bacchius, natives of Flavia Neopolis in

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2 Skarsaune argues that this was conditioned by the emergence of a new generation of rulers who prided themselves on their philosophical credentials, as well as their political position (2010: 123).
Palestine, present this address and petition in [sic] behalf of those of all nations who are unjustly hated and wantonly abused, myself being one of them.’ (Bush, 1983, p. 5)³

Similarly, the persecution of Christians often arose because they refused to take part in the public acts of veneration to the Emperor – arising, naturally, from their allegiance to the Christian God – and their refusal to participate in the Imperial cult; but this is what Justin is concerned to contest. Christians cannot be accused of irrationality in their preference for God over the emperor, and Justin advances arguments from the Scriptures and pagan philosophers – especially injunctions against idolatry - to point out they were not as out of step with ancient teaching as their detractors might suggest (Skarsaune, 2010, pp. 125-129). So, in effect, Justin was defending his fellow-believers against legal and theological misinterpretation; but I wonder whether Justin would have done this if he were simply concerned to prove the logic of Christian belief, or merely pre-occupied with the ordering of a holy people as disciples first and foremost, without some interest in the public standing of the Church and the legal fate of his fellow-Christians.

From Biblical and patristic times, therefore, there has been an identifiable strand of apologetic literature which is not only concerned with the ‘truth’ of the gospel in a philosophical or propositional sense, but its ‘efficacy’ as a form of practical wisdom that informs a Christian public witness. Whilst these apologists are certainly concerned to defend the intellectual coherence and Scriptural provenance of such witness, their arguments also offer a theologically-reasoned rationale for the legitimacy of faith to speak truth to power and exercise a public vocation of active citizenship. What is more, they exemplify the dialogical and ‘bilingual’ nature of apologetics, in terms of the need to adopt the thought-forms and vernacular of one’s

³ See also the opening citation of the apology of Athenagorus, c. 177 C.E. (Athenagoras, 1983, p. 35)
interlocutors. This helps us elaborate Stackhouse’s conjunction of public theology and apologetics, since this is about justifying the moral and civic probity of communities of Christians as much as it is about defending the ‘truth’ of the gospel and paving the way to conversion. So the ‘apologies’ may be seen as a form of emergent public theology, insofar as they advance a theological argument in public for the right of Christians to live as citizens within the body politic without fear or hindrance.

**Apologetics and Modernity**

[Moving forward a few centuries!] Contemporary apologetics has overwhelmingly come to denote a justification by appeal to rational, propositional argument, with a view to leading another to their own profession of faith. ‘Christian apologetics is the scholarly reflection on Christian apologetic witness and dialogue as the intellectual justification of the truth and relevance of the Christian faith.’ (van den Toren 2011, 27) It is often regarded as a branch of evangelism, a prelude to conversion in which the aim is to win the argument. Or as Avery Dulles puts it, ‘the apologist is regarded as an aggressive, opportunistic person who tries, by fair means or foul, to argue people into joining the church’ (Dulles 1971, p. xv)

This reflects important epistemological issues, of course, not just about the nature of knowing but the very nature of revelation. Historically, apologetics has assumed in some respect that human culture does possess some kind of common ground of shared norms and meanings. The emergence of neo-orthodoxy in the twentieth century posed a radical challenge to the very possibility of apologetics; as Edward Oakes remarks, ‘Indeed, what is “neo” about neoorthodoxy is precisely this refusal to consider the apologetic task’ (1992, p. 41). Barth’s reaction against the Kantian and Schleiermacherian elevation of experience as the universal grounding of revelation
and theological apprehension was absolute: by stressing the unknowability of God independent of God’s self-revelation he was not concerned to demonstrate how, even by analogy, the world thus revealed inhabited similar space to that of other forms of knowledge. Rather, this takes the discourse of the ecclesial community as \textit{a priori}; there is no common ground or shared rationality on which to establish an apologetics which sees itself as a bridging or mediating discourse. The only apologetic is the enunciation of a systematic theology as God’s saving word to sinful humanity.

This finds its most full-blooded expression, perhaps, in the perspective taken by Cornelius van Til (1894-1987), who adopted what is often termed a ‘presuppositionalist’ approach – effectively a form of fideism. He argued that human reason is incapable of acknowledging the gospel; attempts to conduct apologetics on grounds of analogies between Christian and non-Christian worldviews are futile. The apologist must start from Scripture’s own testimony about itself, so one has to make a leap of faith before being capable of apprehending anything else about the Gospel.

‘To find out what man is and who God is, one can only go to Scripture. Faith in the self-attesting Christ of the Scriptures is the beginning, not the conclusion of wisdom!’ (van Til, 1971, p. 3), cited in Beilby, 2011: 78.

A leading contemporary writer in apologetics is William Lane Craig (2008), who argues that apologetics is essentially a rational justification or exposition of the truth-claims of Christianity. It is distinctive from evangelism, in that apologetics is ‘a theoretical discipline that tries to answer the question, “What rational warrant can be given for the Christian faith?”’ (Craig, 2008: 15) Craig’s approach structures itself around key doctrinal themes: doctrines of God, creation, the
person and work of Christ, resurrection, the relationship between faith and reason (see Craig, 2008; and also Tacelli and Kreeft, 1994). An adequate ‘defence’ of the faith must conform with revealed tradition as set down in Scripture and doctrine.

Another writer, L. Russ Bush (1983) characterises a number of types of contemporary apologetics: rationalism, or arguments from the laws of logic; empiricism or experientialism, which finds evidence in nature or religious experience; fideism or presuppositionalism which argues that the nature of revelation is such that it can only be self-authenticating within an a priori commitment to the paradigm of faith; and evidentialism, which looks for historical or scientific proofs. ‘Apologetics, in the broad sense, is what all theologians use when they commend their views to those unbelievers who might listen to them.’ (Bush, 1983: 375).

But the problem with this kind of modernist propositional apologetics is that in attempting to argue for the distinctiveness of Christian faith they have capitulated to secular, positivist criteria of empirical verification. This is at the heart of the contest with the so-called ‘new Atheists’ – so another reason for adopting the imagination, aesthetics and creative arts is to re-mint the currency of apologetic exchange. Post-liberals and other neo-orthodox thinkers may be right to resist the notion that in order to secure secular recognition, theology must rest on forms of philosophical foundations that are ultimately alien to its own specificity. But the way out is not to abandon apologetics altogether, or to assume theological claims must be reducible or translatable without remainder into pure reason; but rather to present it as a ‘thick description’: thoroughly contextualized, rooted and multi-faceted, justifying this on the grounds that it actually represents a more authentic picture of what it means to know.
‘Abandonment of the Cartesian assumption that all inferential knowledge must be founded on self-evident, noninferential insights … is in fact a great boon, not only to apologetics, but to philosophy itself and to the whole human effort to get clear about what it means to know … But it is being abandoned not to suit the convenience of theologians but because it fails adequately to account for the world and our relation to it …’ (Oakes, pp. 51-52, italics in original)

This begins to articulate a dissatisfaction with deductive propositional styles of apologetics and an interest in finding alternative forms of apologetic reasoning. Narrative is one form of expression that offers access to a pluralistic public realm in order to engage in dialogue and apologetics. In his article, ‘Apologetics and the Pathos of Narrative Theology’, published in 1992, Edward T. Oakes surveys the popularity of narrative as a ‘privileged locus for doing theology’, suggesting that there may be a number of factors:

1. It enables it to connect with literary and other imaginative genres [apologetics]
2. Narrative relates to lived experience in ways that enable it to respond to pastoral and existential issues
3. It reminds us of the narrative nature of Biblical literature and provides alternative to propositional, doctrinal approaches to theology. Narrative is not merely a dramatization of Christian doctrine but the very essence of its structure.
4. It makes it easier to contextualise the history of doctrine and locates revelation less as ‘a surprising, heteronomous “deposit” that landed on the human scene more or less literally out of the blue’: when revelation is understood as a form of narrative, ‘it is then more easily seen as simply a more intense and clarifying narrative, one that structures and gives meaning to all the other narrative lines that make up a human life.’ (p. 38)
Oakes laments the way in which theology has been ‘robbed of its rich and storied character by the too ready assumption … that [it] must work in the manner, if not of science, at least in that Cartesian style characterized by rigor and the search for self-evident principles – that is, propositionally.’ (Oakes, 1992, p. 57) Potentially, though, narrative renders theological discourse ‘public’ and plausible in the face of Enlightenment challenges to the cognitive plausibility of Christian doctrine and its retreat into privatized, subjective belief. It no longer claims universal, objective status but as one way (amongst many) of rendering reality. We may belong to our particular narratives and world-views, but our inhabitation of these stories is what qualifies us to belong to a broader, more universal history as well. As *homo narrans* we find our place in the world through the specificity of language and context but these are actually how we participate in what Paul Ricoeur terms ‘the game of telling’ (Ricoeur, ‘The Narrative Function’ p. 294). Our very sense of historicity comes to us by means of telling stories, and this is the way we gain access to a continuity with humanity in other times and places. If ‘narrative is genuinely indicative of the world’, says Edward Oakes, ‘then that implies that we are indeed all linked by the horizon of that world.’ (p. 51) Narrative is thus one form of expression that offers access to a shared world of meaning in order to engage in dialogue and apologetics.

A recent collection of essays (*Imaginative Apologetics: Theology, Philosophy and the Catholic Tradition*, edited by Andrew Davison, 2011) attempts to provide a similar, alternative epistemology of apologetics against that which holds ‘ ... that the only “reason” which discloses truth is a cold, detached reason that is isolated from both feeling and imagination, as likewise from both narrative and ethical evaluation. Christian apologetics now needs rather to embrace the opposite assumption that our most visionary and ideal insights can most disclose the real,
provided that this is accompanied by a widening in democratic scope of our sympathies for the ordinary, and the capacities and vast implications of the quotidian …’ (Milbank, 2011: xxii)

The premise behind *Imaginative Apologetics*, therefore, is partly that the kind of apologetics familiar to Irenaeus, Schleiermacher or Bishop Berkeley is not appropriate for the contemporary world. In the face of post-secular scepticism and pluralism, Christian apologetics may need to reconsider adopting new strategies and forms of discourse, which concentrates on harnessing the imagination in pursuit of its aims. The editor himself argues that, ‘Throughout this collection there is an enquiry into the nature of reason and the role, within it, of the imagination’ (Davison, p xxv). Similarly, in his Foreword, John Milbank maintains that ‘it is the true exercise of the imagination which … guides and cautions our discursive judgement.’ (p. xxiii)

So, we have explorations of the relationship between literature and apologetics – including, predictably, an essay on C.S. Lewis, as well as one on the representation of secularist arguments in the novels of writers such as Martin Amis and Ian McEwan.

Apologetics is presented as kind of contextual theology, entailing a reading of the signs of the times as revealed through popular culture, the arts and humanities:

‘It is not possible to discover how the Christian faith, and the Church, can speak meaningfully into a secular world unless efforts have first been made to understand the shape of this world itself: its values, assumptions, prejudices, cravings; especially as these reveal where the veil is thinnest between secular and religious concerns, and where, in fact, the Spirit may be going
before those who already belong to faith, made manifest in places beyond the confines of the institutional Church.’ (Lazenby, p. 46).

This, of course, is entirely consistent with the sensibilities of the earliest evangelists for the Gospel, who knew well the importance of addressing their audiences on their own terms, using concepts and arguments that would connect directly with their concerns, in language familiar to their indigenous world-view. Another contributor, similarly, speaks of making Christianity attractive and compelling by virtue of its ‘inherent beauty and goodness.’ (Hughes, 2011: 9) According to this model, then, apologetics is not interested in primarily propositional truth (although any representation of faith will be intellectually robust), so much as something that excites our desires. By the same token, an engagement with things like visual arts, literature, film and material cultures constitutes a significant arena for apologetics, since these are the places where questions of truth, beauty, goodness are encountered; they are “diagnostic spaces” [x 2]: places where the relationship between religion and the wider world is being clearly played out’ (Lazenby, 2011, p. 47).

Just as this model of apologetics looks to different territory and to epistemologies of imagination over propositional rationality, so too its objective is not to prove correspondence with doctrinal truth, but to seek out the places in which ‘the world invites us to think of God.’ (Davison, 2011, p. 31). This, clearly, presents a very inclusive theology of revelation, reminiscent of early apologists who were happy to see prefigurations of the gospel in ancient, pagan and non-Christian traditions: a sense that the world does not have to be negated or overcome and that the process is one in which common grace, not theology, takes the initiative, perhaps even being more ‘at home’ with such glimpses of the Divine. It is a Tillichian, revisionist, rather than
Barthian and neo-orthodox perspective. It also gestures towards a more incarnational and sacramental understanding in which ‘truth’ is not articulated in the logical ordering of doctrine but embodied in the practices of the Christian life:

‘Christian apologetics witnesses to a different sense of what is real. Since these convictions are basic or axiomatic, we do not argue to them. Instead, we show what difference it makes to think this way. As a consequence, it is useful for Christian apologetics to make an active demonstration of what it is like to interpret the world in a Christian way. Apologetics is as much an invitation as an argument: an invitation to “taste and see” what it is like to live and think differently.’

(Davison, 2011: 15)

Notwithstanding, there is a clear gap in this collection, and that is any kind of engagement with apologetics in the public realm beyond literature and the arts and science. Astonishingly, there is no discussion of the role of media; and nothing about public theology at all, as one of the most significant places in which the teachings of the Christian tradition engage with the everyday worlds of politics, economics or civil society. What is the reason for this omission? That we cannot exercise our imaginations in these areas of life? That Christian engagement in these fields to defend and commend the grounds for theological and ethical intervention – say in the area of poverty, or a discussion of how to cast one’s vote or the nature of urban life and faith (all familiar areas of discourse within public theology) – might not benefit from the use of imaginative apologetics?

Yet as we know, popular culture and media output of all kinds are some of the most innovative and creative arenas within which people explore questions of truth and meaning: what it means to
be human, the beginnings and endings of life, the nature of difference, the future of the planet – and these are not simply aesthetic but political and moral issues too. Similarly, performative and aesthetic forms of political or public protest could constitute alternative forms of theological expression, more engaging than official reports or the conventions of debating-chambers and political assemblies. Not to say that these dimensions of public life do not matter, but suggesting that there are alternative ways to shape civil society and public debate.

There are some signs of this. For example, Mary Doak has written on public theology as narrative, as a way through the impasse between an over-particularistic, self-referential ecclesial discourse and the adoption of the lowest common denominator. Narrative allows the rhetorical power of theological tradition to be introduced into the public domain ‘with their religious roots clearly intact’; and yet narrative is sufficiently porous to enable common, communicative space to emerge as a result (Doak, 2004, p. 15). In a recent book on the theological dimensions of the Occupy movement, Kwok Pui-lan and Jorge Rieger point to its creative uses of new technologies of social media, and the centrality of ritual and symbolism as expressions of participants’ ‘deep solidarity’ as well as the subversion of conventional power relations. These actions represent a habitus of faith whereby new worlds of the political imagination are envisioned:

‘Rituals and symbolic actions are important ways to cultivate a different way of being in the world and of relating to one another. Rituals that reinscribe the power differentials of the world would likely cultivate habits of thoughts and behaviors that reinforce the status quo. Rituals that subvert power and disrupt our common sense would more likely bring us to the liminal spaces, which are spaces in between … In these liminal spaces, participants are able to think of their roles
anew because they are in transition between what is familiar and what is to come.’ (Rieger and Kwok Pui-lan, 2012, p. 126)

None of this discounts the significance of normative, theologically-grounded principles, but simply underlines that the arena of apologetics may best be exercised not in the adversarial combat of rational proof but the incarnational, sacramental spaces of artful, purposeful action. Such an epistemology of apologetics also configures faith as a kind of ‘practical wisdom’ that gives shape to the world and orientates Christians in their actions and behaviours. The invitation is not to ‘believe’ but to embrace a world-view which ‘unless it is also shown in action it is not adequately shown at all’ (Davison, 2011, p. 26). There’s a strongly ‘performative’ or even sacramental dimension to that: Christians commend the faith by demonstrating, practising it. And to translate that into Max Stackhouse’s terms, that could take the form of a witness to the difference it makes to the civil responsibilities of the Christian – in providing an explanation to other citizens of the reasons behind a particular public stance.

**Conclusion**

So I’ve been arguing that a ‘post-secular’ climate of political debate, that is both more sceptical and more pluralist, and yet in some respects is more receptive to the language of values, requires a more explicit level of self-justification on the part of the Christian churches. That will entail a more sophisticated and self-conscious strategy of explanation and justification – a new intensity and grammar, possibly, to the ‘bilingualism’ of public theology.
Stackhouse’s advocacy of the necessity of public theology is an apologetic defence of its practical potential for the common good, as a public discourse that articulates the values that underpin a thriving global civil society (Hainsworth and Paeth, 2010: xiii-xiv). Public theology ‘must show that it can form, inform and sustain the moral and spiritual architecture of a civil society so that truth, justice and mercy are more nearly approximated in the souls of persons and in the institutions of the common life.’ (Stackhouse, 2007: 107) Public theology is not only concerned to do theology about public issues, but called to do its theology in public, by demonstrating a transparency and accountability towards a thriving, plural public realm that transcends special pleading or sectional interest in the name of the common good.

References


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