

“A Fresh Agenda for Apologetics in the 21st Century”
By John W. Morehead

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Apologetics remains an important tool for the church in the new millennium. It is a discipline that helps in the proclamation of the gospel by concentrating on the presentation of answers to questions and clarifications about Christian belief. As Avery Dulles’ historical survey shows, in every generation apologists have had to address different kinds of questions and issues. This has meant that apologetic styles and methods have been reconfigured very often so as to effectively handle the spiritual problems of the day. Once again we find ourselves in circumstances where the apologetic challenges and questions are changing, and so it is appropriate that we pause to reassess and reformulate apologetics in order to create a fresh agenda for the discipline in the 21st century.

Missiologist David Bosch stated that, “The mission of the church needs constantly to be renewed and reconceived.” In the post-Christendom environment in the West, a new atmosphere exists far different from the Christendom culture in which evangelicalism was birthed. The move from modernism to a developing and increasingly influential postmodernism represents a significant cultural shift with major implications for church and ministry. In response to these changing cultural forces apologists should be encouraged that apologetics remains a valid part of the task of the church, yet also be challenged by the need to create room for a “renewed and reconceived” apologetic agenda.

Apologists and apologetically-minded Christians are encouraged to consider various aspects of apologetics that might assist in the reformulation of apologetics for the new century. What follows are some indicators for fresh apologetic engagements:

Contextualized apologetics

American culture represents a patchwork mosaic of various subcultures. Each subculture holds to a variety of views on spirituality, values, attitudes, and behaviors that provide members or participants in a group with a sense of self-identity. In many ways our American experience of cultural and religious diversity is nothing new. The nation’s slogan “E Pluribus Unum” – out of many, one – is a reminder that since colonial times America has been a haven for those seeking the freedom to practice their religions. Such diversity has not been confined to a variety of Christian denominations, but rather has long pedigree in time where people groups have also opted for folk religion, esoteric beliefs, in religions of Asiatic origin, and in many new religious groups.

Cross-cultural missionaries understand that in order for the gospel to be understood and to be relevant to differing people groups and subcultures, the gospel must be appropriately communicated for different cultural contexts. This process is known as contextualization. Harold Netland of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School has suggested that apologetics too must be “culture-specific” or contextualized appropriately in order to be effective. Netland affirms that the content of the Gospel transcends all cultures, but he highlights how apologetic styles must adapt and address the problems and questions of a

given culture or sub-culture. In other words, apologists need to know what cultures and sub-cultures exist, and discover first-hand what are the questions and spiritual problems of these cultures. To do that apologists can no longer afford to be mere arm-chair observers of culture; rather they must do primary field-work research in meeting people in sub-cultures, observing how they live, how they apply their beliefs to life, and discovering from the horse's mouth what their actual apologetic questions happen to be. There is little to be gained by trotting out answers to questions that nobody is asking anymore.

With the need for a culture-specific apologetic in mind consider examples of contextualized apologetic approaches. In the first example, a rational emphasis will be appropriate in modernist circles where reason and logical argumentation are valued, whereas a relational approach will be more effective in postmodern contexts. This shift in emphasis should not be construed as an abandonment of reason or the use of apologetics as a capitulation to some form of irrationalism. Rather, it is an acknowledgment of shifting cultural realities in the West and strategic changes that should be considered in order for apologists to be effective communicators. In the modernist context great value was attached to arguments and evidences. In this context it was appropriate to provide "evidences that demand a verdict." In the postmodern context, reason is still valuable (since human beings are rational creatures created in God's image), but the place of reason in spirituality is different. For a postmodernist, truth and experience go hand in hand. There must be a combination and integration of the rational and the experiential. The use of a traditional evidential apologetic with heavy emphasis on logic and evidence is often rejected by a generation interested in truth, but often looking for it in relational ways, and in ways that also make room for mystery and experience.

In another example, when dialoguing with a Latter-day Saint, traditionally an apologetic approach is utilized which contrasts heresy with Protestant biblical orthodoxy. Apologists might reconsider whether a strong hermeneutical apologetic is appropriate in this context. While fidelity to Protestant biblical orthodoxy is of great importance to Protestant apologists, Latter-day Saints are more concerned with an epistemology of feelings where truth is determined by subjective experience. A contextualized and reformulated apologetic response would attempt to draw upon personal testimony and the language of experience in communicating the gospel and biblical truth. The apologist interested in utilizing apologetic methods appropriate for differing contexts will be sensitive to the need to formulate a "receptor oriented" apologetic for their cultural frame of reference.

Globally-informed apologetics

Netland has also noted that Western theology has come under increasing criticism in the non-Western world where apologetics has been understood as either counter-productive or irrelevant. While sympathetic to non-Western concerns in theology, Netland argues that if "properly construed, apologetics is ancillary to evangelism and is unavoidable in effective proclamation of the gospel." Even so, Netland also states that adopting Western apologetic methods in non-Western contexts is inappropriate. As the world continues to develop under the influence of globalization, Western theology and apologetics will have to adapt in order to be relevant to the concerns and challenges of the Two-Thirds world.

A globally-informed apologetic is also relevant in the pluralistic West. With the increasing influence of non-Christian worldviews in Western nations, only an apologetic that reflects contemporary global concerns will speak with relevance.

Ancillary apologetics

In meeting the challenge of a new century apologists might also consider rethinking the appropriate role and place of apologetics in Christian discipleship. Certainly the use of apologetics needs to be expanded in Western culture, yet when apologetic methods are utilized many times the defense of the faith becomes an end unto itself. When this happens the apologist is prone to a defensive self-identity wherein the refutation of false thinking is seen as the primary reason for ministry.

Prominent apologist Gordon Lewis has commented on this mentality in apologetics applied to new religious movements. He noted that curiously apologists working in the field of new religions envision their calling as a “counter” to various heresies, yet missionaries to world religions would never characterize their ministries as “counter-Buddhist” or “counter-Muslim.” Lewis suggests that the remedy for this situation is for a new conception evangelical ministries to new religions not as primarily apologetic or “counter-cult,” but rather in a positive and pro-active sense of frontier missionaries to unreached peoples in alternative spirituality. This new conception for apologetic ministry will only be possible to the extent that we recognize that apologetics is not an end unto itself, but is a tool that is ancillary to the missional and evangelistic calling of the church.

What some apologists should reflect upon is the need to distinguish between simply answering doctrinal problems (like refuting heresies) and the processes involved in proclaiming the gospel and making disciples. The refutation of someone’s beliefs does not equate to evangelism and contextual mission. A negative debunking of heresy is not synonymous with missions. Missions involve understanding a culture, the people’s beliefs and practices, and the questions and issues that these people wrestle with. To refute a person’s beliefs is scarcely the equivalent of encompassing all that a missionary must do. Apologists need to embrace and apply the principles of cross-cultural missions in their work. Missions and apologetics are not antithetical, but can be used in a harmonious way to proclaim and commend the gospel and to nurture new disciples in Christ. Dealing with doctrinal objections then has its place, but it does not constitute the whole picture. If we can grasp a sense of ourselves as missional apologists this might be a prescription for a healthy apologetic agenda in the 21st century.

Diverse apologetics

As traditionally formulated, Western apologetics has tended to be primarily the presentation of rational arguments. But a purely or largely rational approach to apologetics is neither faithful to the biblical example, nor appropriate in many segments of Western culture. David Wilkinson, an apologist with the University of Durham, notes that in Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman he did not merely present a series of rational arguments. Rather, he engaged her imagination in conversation (John 4:1-15). Wilkinson believes that a reformulated and relevant apologetic for the 21st century will be winsome and diverse, incorporating not only logical arguments but also “narrative, image, poetry,

dance, music, and parable.” Wilkinson suggests that the apologist’s self-conception as artist in addition to scientist or lawyer is crucial to the success of contemporary apologetics that seeks to be culturally relevant.

Humble apologetics

A fresh apologetic agenda might also involve a reassessment of evangelical humility and empathy in apologetic ministry. Given the frequently confrontational and uncharitable nature of many Christian apologists we might ask ourselves whether in our zeal for truth we have been caught up in a crusade against false ideas or whether we genuinely love “not-yet-Christians” and seek to communicate Christ to them. The reminder of the need for humility as we embody an appropriate apologetic is important, because as missionary statesman David Hesselgrave reminds us, “although missionaries have been commanded by Christ to preach the gospel, they cannot command a hearing. They must win a hearing by demonstrating that they are people of integrity, credibility, and goodwill.”

Further, Christopher Partridge has noted the changing religio-cultural landscape of the West and the resulting missiological and apologetic implications for the church. He concluded that,

generally speaking, when communicating the Christian faith in the West, confrontational evangelism, rationalist apologetics, and dogmatically expressed exclusivist theologies are inappropriate. Rather, what needs to be appreciated is the value of genuine friendship, humility regarding one’s knowledge of another worldview, and a palpable desire to understand.ⁱ

Evangelical apologists may go a long way in demonstrating their willingness to learn, as well as to be empathetic and humble, by developing a greater willingness to listen, a lesson that may be difficult for some of us used to an apologetic of rebuke, argumentation, and proclamation.

Conclusion

In our age of religious and cultural pluralism apologetics still has a vital role to play. But as we have seen, apologetics must be reassessed and reformulated in order to serve more effectively in communicating the gospel with cultural relevancy. Those who take seriously Lesslie Newbigin’s call for a genuinely missionary encounter with the post-Christian Pagan West will work to develop and apply appropriate apologetic methodologies to the challenges before us.

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