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An Apologetic Armoury

by Fisher Humphreys

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EVANGELISM is our helping to make faith a possibility for men; apologetics is the phase of evangelism which wrestles specifically with unbelief and its sources. When men have intellectual problems with the Christian faith or think they have them, an evangelist must employ apologetics to respond to their problem. Problems with the Christian faith are intellectual if they are about facts, and apparently many people today have them. So apologetics is not for an intellectual elite (as J. V. Langmead-Casserley has said) but for the mass of people who are uncertain whether the Christian message is true.

There are many weapons in the apologetic armoury. Some are more appropriate for one problem than for others; some are more useful to one apologist than to others; some are not useful at all. For example, in a book entitled *The Incarnate Lord* (1928) L. S. Thornton translated Christian theology into the philosophical language of the system of A. N. Whitehead. This presentation of Christian faith is apologetically useful, but only to the relatively small group of people whose understanding of the world is Whiteheadian. Again, some Christians with an acute awareness of the difficulties which modern science presents for Christian faith have attenuated the Christian faith so that secular men may accept it, but in making it believable they also have made it not worth believing. By watching weapons like uncritical modernism misfire, the Christian apologist learns to select his weapons carefully. Several weapons are being used effectively today.

1. *The Traditional Arguments.* Few apologists today could begin a presentation with the confidence of Thomas Aquinas: "There are five ways to prove the existence of God." One of the important questions an apologist must answer as he considers the worth of the ontological, cosmological, teleological, and moral arguments is, What do these really achieve? Some theologians, like Gustaf Aulén, think that the arguments are a betrayal of faith and that the "God" of these arguments is really an idol rather than the Father of Jesus Christ (see *The Drama and the Symbols*, pp. 72-88). Others believe that the arguments are inductive, pointing to evidences which, taken cumulatively, make it probable that there is a God. One

philosopher, H. D. Lewis, has said that they do this in such a way as to converge upon a single intuitive insight of the reality of God. This insight, he says, is integral to our experience of God (see *Philosophy of Religion*, chapters 14-17). In his popular book *Mere Christianity* C. S. Lewis used the moral argument with great persuasiveness to yield the fairly modest conclusion, "We have cause to be uneasy." Then he went on to explain the Christian understanding of Him who causes our uneasiness.

2. *Miracles and Prophecy.* Christians are divided over whether miracles and prophecy are effective apologetic weapons. Bernard Ramm, for example, believes that they are (see *Protestant Christian Evidences*, chapters 3-5), and it is fairly certain that this was the view of most apologists through the centuries. However, Alan Richardson, for example, thinks that prophecy and miracles are no longer effective because men today have a more critical attitude toward them than men in the past had (see *Christian Apologetics*, chapters 7-8). Many Christians today feel that it is only because they have faith in Christ that they are able to accept the miracles and prophecies of Scripture as authentic. It is difficult to assess how receptive our contemporaries are to these evidences. The popularity of Hal Lindsey's book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, would seem to indicate that interest in prophecy is high.

Perhaps the best approach to take toward miracles and prophecy is for the apologist to determine whether or not his audience already has an interest in them. If they do, he may wish to capitalize on their interest; if they do not, he might do well to look for another more immediate point of contact with them.

3. *Religious Experience.* We have said that apologetics is used to meet men's factual difficulties with the Christian faith. Sometimes the difficulty concerns present facts; men doubt if Christian faith makes any difference today. They see churches as religious museums maintaining ruins from out of the past and devoid of life for the present. When this is the problem the apologist faces, he can be very effective by sharing Christian experience. He may want to tell about his own pilgrimage or about those of other Christians.

The apologetic utility of religious experience often goes unappreciated because experience sometimes has been employed to answer the wrong questions. Experience cannot answer questions like, Is there a God? or, Is Jesus the Saviour? It should not be used to answer such questions. But when the question is, What does it matter whether I believe in Christ or not?, then experience is important. And for many men this is the real question: As a matter of fact, what difference does it make? Our experience of the gospel does not make the gospel true, but it does confirm that the gospel makes a difference today.

4. *Eristics*. The Swiss theologian Emil Brunner used “eristics” to describe the struggle of the Christian apologist against everything in our world that opposes Christian truth. Eristics is not a defence of the faith but an offensive assault on the enemies of faith. There are several kinds of enemies, and they determine the nature of the eristic attack.

One set of enemies is the positions which men take vis-à-vis the Christian faith; atheism and agnosticism. The apologist attacks atheism by asking, How do you know that there is no God? He attacks agnosticism by asking, How do you know that no one can know whether or not there is a God? A little probing reveals that the foundations of these positions are often shaky.

Another set of enemies is the world's idols. Men deal with things which are not God as if they were. They treat education, life, sex, wealth, and homeland as divine. The apologist may appreciate the worth of all of these, but because he knows that they are not God he attacks the claims that they are of ultimate concern.

Another enemy is the entire secular environment in which we live. Louis Cassels was correct when he wrote: “The first big hurdle every modern pilgrim must surmount is a built-in, largely unconscious bias against belief in God” (*The Reality of God*, p. 5). While the Western world has not become a secular city, it has become an unchristian city. Men today are not naturally disposed to believe in God. The Christian apologist must attack the prejudice against the Christian God in order to get a fair hearing for his view. An effective attack on phoney popular views can go a long way toward making Christianity a live option to men who have accepted those views uncritically.

Another group of enemies is the group of outspoken criticisms of Christian faith. Men of all sorts have rejected Christian faith and have developed their own unchristian views. Some, like Marx and Freud, have influenced most men; others, like B. F. Skinner and A. J. Ayer, have influenced smaller groups. To attack developed non-Christian thought the apologist must work hard. In keeping with the golden rule, the apologist should know his opposition first-hand, not by hearsay. He should think through his attack carefully, being sure to be fair and just.

There is one other enemy to be attacked, though it is somewhat different from the others. It is the problem of evil. In particular, pointless relatively innocent human suffering constitutes a major hurdle to belief in an omnipotent loving God. Sooner or later every apologist will face this problem, and he should be prepared to say something about it. It is my opinion that he would do well to begin by determining whether or not his questioner is serious about evil as a problem. A person who is seriously concerned about suffering

will be doing something about it; persons who do not attempt to mitigate suffering probably raise the question because they think it is clever to do so, not because they really care for those who suffer. It is important for the apologist to know this because if his hearers are not really serious they will not be able to accept his response to the problem.

In the past Christians have responded to the problem of evil in terms of its origin, but I believe that we would do well to respond to it in terms of its destiny. Any attempt to explain how the good Creator allowed evil to exist sounds to many listeners like a fatuous attempt to say that evil doesn't really exist. To explain evil is to explain it away, and that is what the Christian must never do. Rather than reply to evil in terms of creation, the apologist may reply in terms of redemption. God in Christ destroyed the forces of evil that wreck our world and our lives, and in the final consummation the victory will be complete. The Christian is one who has faith that evil will disappear under the redemptive grace of God and that men will be liberated from suffering, death, and sin. The gospel is the story of the Son of God transforming men's viciousness and his own suffering into the salvation of men, like raw material made into a fine product. God does not explain evil and suffering to men; he redeems men from evil and suffering. Christian theodicy is rooted in redemption not in creation.

5. *Historical Apologetics*. The gospel is not advice about how to get along in life or a new law to replace the Ten Commandments or an abstract teaching about eternal principles, however noble and true. The gospel is a news story about something that happened in the three days from the first Good Friday to the first Easter Sunday. So Christian faith is historical faith, and some apologists have found that history is an effective weapon with which to combat the claim that there is no evidence to support the Christian's belief in God.

The historical argument sometimes includes a marshalling of evidence for the dependability of the New Testament as a historical record. John Warwick Montgomery, for example, argues that on the basis of bibliographical, internal, and external evidence the New Testament documents "can be relied upon to give an accurate portrait" of Jesus (*History and Christianity*, p. 40). The argument then goes on to pose questions like these: If you reject the Bible's witness that Christ is the divine Saviour, what are you going to say about Jesus? If you say that Christ was not resurrected, how do you account for the empty tomb? What explanation can you offer for the transformation of the disciples from defeated men into preachers of a saving message? How do you account for the existence of the Church, unless you believe that God was at work here?

The single handicap which the historical apologetic faces, in my judgment, is that it asks men to act in a role that is foreign to most of them, namely, the role of a historian. Obviously most men cannot become critical historians, but they can see for themselves that alternatives to the Christian understanding of what happened in Christ's life are laden with problems. For example, many men can appreciate the fact that it is at least as credible that Jesus rose from the dead as it is that professional executioners failed to be certain that he was dead and allowed him to be buried in a stupor. The historical apologetic has greatest effect when it appeals to men's common sense about history rather than to a professional academic historical sense.

6. *Cultural Apologetics.* If eristics is an attack upon some mistaken ideas of unconverted men, cultural apologetics is an appropriation of some true ideas of unconverted men as an aid to presenting the gospel. Culture provides a point of contact between the apologist and his audience. For an audience interested in recent literature, the futility of life without God has been spelled out by Sartre, Camus, and Kafka. The apologist may use contemporary music or art to communicate to his hearers the importance of the Christian message, and sometimes its meaning as well. The ills of our world are analysed frequently, and the Christian can draw upon these analyses and show how the Christian message offers solutions. In order to do this he needs to become very familiar with the culture and to use it fairly and honestly, letting it say what it was meant to say and not forcing it to serve his purposes artificially. The task of learning about culture is demanding but rewarding.

7. *Clues from the Secular World.* There seems to be a new kind of apologetic developing out of the particular life of secular men. It is a subtle, indirect apologetic, but it is very forceful with some audiences. It seeks incipient faith in the secular world; it looks for hints that life is multidimensional and for confirmations of the Christian faith in non-Christian quarters. For example, in *The Sense of the Presence of God* John Baillie spoke of a wider witness of gratitude. Men sometimes feel grateful for the good things "life" has given them, but they do not know to whom they should express their gratitude. The apologist can tell them. In *A Rumor of Angels* Peter Berger wrote that the universal propensity of children for play is an indication that deep down men feel that there must be a better world. The apologist can tell them about that world. And in *God Beyond Doubt* Geddes MacGregor pointed out that men tend to think of their lives as pilgrimages. They are convinced that life is taking them somewhere. The Christian apologist can begin with this idea and can point to the fulfilment of human destiny in Jesus Christ.

8. *Apologetics of Explanation.* The last apologetic weapon we shall mention is explanation. Explanation is efficient in apologetics because so often what men reject is not really Christian faith but a caricature of it. Men do not know what Christians really believe. We say that God is holy, and they think that we mean he is tyrannical. We say that God is love, and they think that we mean he is sentimental. We say that men should trust in Christ and be born anew, and they think that we mean they should cut their hair and go to church more often. By explaining our faith to men, we help to make it possible for them to believe. In *Your God Is Too Small* J. B. Phillips was effective apologetically because he explained so clearly what Christians believe about God. In an important sense, good theology is good apologetics. Clarity is powerful.

In all apologetics, the most important purpose is to win men, not arguments. The image of an armoury would be misleading if we did not remind ourselves that our enemies are ideas, not men. Apologetics is an act of war toward falsehood and ignorance; it is an act of love toward men. A good apologist never forgets that.

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