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The Art of Apologetics in the Twenty-First Century

David Wilkinson argues for a form of Christian apologetics which is not merely intellectual confrontation or defence, but which is personal and holistic and which takes contemporary culture seriously. The truth of the message is not diluted, but the character and attitude of the apologist is as important as the arguments he or she deploys.

Introduction

Are you ready to read the fortune of the twenty-first century? Once more we will have to turn and converse with the secular world. Once more we will have to preach the gospel beyond church walls. Sermons will be more evangelical and, above all, more apologetic. For fifty years...there has been some tendency to regard the secular world 'out there' as the enemy of biblical faith....If nothing else, the adversary position lacks courtesy. Once more we must learn to converse with the mind of our age and we must do so with genuine love and respect.¹

So writes Buttrick reflecting on the future for preaching. Yet what does it mean to be 'more apologetic' in the twenty-first century? Often the discussion proceeds immediately to content, in terms of what kind of gospel is to be preached. However, a much-neglected question is the style of apologetic engagement. Buttrick is right to want to move our engagement with the world away from conflict and ask questions about the style as well as the content.

Apologetics, like preaching, is an art to be developed rather than a science to be understood. In developing apologetics for our time, we need to rediscover its biblical roots. Often our western theological tradition has narrowed the practice of apologetics, making it largely irrelevant to contemporary mission. A broader biblical view allows us to reformulate apologetics as an essential part of Christian ministry and evangelism in the new millennium.

In this article, I will explore some of the biblical background and then give a theological reflection on the practice of apologetics as I see it within western

1 D. Buttrick, *A Captive Voice: The Liberation of Preaching*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville 1994, pp 105f.

culture. I write this with a great deal of hesitation. Apologetics is easy to write about, but far more difficult to do!

Biblical Background

Some of the biblical background to apologetics is well known. The word 'apologia' is used three times by Paul as he makes his defence or reasoned statement of the gospel first before the crowd in Jerusalem, then to Felix the governor and then to King Agrippa (Acts 22:1, 24:10, 26:1-2). Paul defends himself against charges made about him, but does so by giving a reasoned account of the Christian faith and showing its relevance to the people to whom he is speaking.

Yet further reflection on the biblical material is important. Those involved in apologetics are eager to use 1 Peter 3:15-16 in order to justify the importance of their subject: 'Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.' It is interesting that the quotation often stops there. Yet it goes on, 'But do this with gentleness and respect.' This in Calvin's words (and John Owen's translation) is a 'most necessary admonition'² It is a reminder that it is not only the content of apologetics that is important, but also the way you do apologetics. Apologetics needs to be located in the quality of our relationships with others, and our fear of God.³

Perhaps one of the clearest models of apologetics in action is Luke's account of Paul's ministry in Athens in Acts 17:16-34. It demonstrates some of the key features of apologetics within the Christian tradition, and also has important parallels to the situation today. It may be important for those of us in western Europe to recognize that Paul has limited success in Athens compared to other cities he visited (Acts 17:32-34). This of course gave rise to a popular but flawed interpretation that Paul had been in error in his evangelistic preaching in Athens. He put his trust in worldly philosophy without concentrating on the cross, an error he corrected when he moved on to Corinth (Acts 18:1-11, 1 Cor. 2:1-5). Such an interpretation however will not do. It does not do justice to Paul's contextualizing of the gospel in different regions and for different groups, and the fact that Paul did make significant converts at Athens.

However, in opposing such an interpretation, it should not be overlooked that Athens was a difficult place for the gospel. It was pluralistic, permissive and bibleless, in a way that resonates with much of contemporary British society. The idols on every Athenian street corner may not be the experience of the people of Aberdeen, Armagh or Ashington, but a widespread ignorance of the Christian gospel coupled with spiritual hunger is not too dissimilar. It is therefore interesting to speculate on why the Athenian culture seemed so resistant to the gospel. No doubt, as in our culture, it was a complex mix of intellectual, historical and spiritual factors. Some cultures both in biblical and contemporary times seem to present an open door to the gospel and the Spirit moves in amazing ways. Other cultures at other times seem to be closed to the gospel.

2 J. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, The Calvin Translation Society, Edinburgh 1855, p 16.

3 C. E. B. Cranfield, *I and II Peter and Jude*, SCM Press, London 1960, p 100.

It is not defeatism to acknowledge the reality that British culture at the beginning of the twenty-first century is difficult territory for the preaching of the gospel. The lack of converts and growth in churches is often ascribed to our lack of prayer and spiritual life. That is no doubt true, but may in part be due to the resistance of the culture to the gospel. Raymond Fung, in a classic picture concerning the evangelization of Europe, likened western culture to the parable of the prodigal son. Although they may be signs of the prodigal culture wanting to return home, at the moment it is still a long way off.⁴ In such a situation, apologetics has a key role. However it will be a different role from the role of apologetics within a culture which is judged to be Christian.

The key elements in Paul's approach provide a framework for our own contemporary thinking. First, he shows a respect for secular culture, taking time to understand how those who are not Christians think and act. Second, he looks for conversation partners both in the market place and in the debating chamber. Third, he argues the gospel with a commitment to reason, presenting it as Barrett has suggested in terms of the resonances between the Old Testament and Greek philosophy.⁵ Fourth, he is responsive to context, presenting the gospel quite differently from his emphasis on messiahship and the scriptures in Thessalonica and Berea (Acts 17:1-15) and later on the cross in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:18-2:5). Finally, his apologetic approach leads eventually to clear proclamation of the gospel, rather than being an end in itself.

How might we build on this framework for our own situation? Let me suggest a number of principles.

Contemporary Apologetics

The question of relevance

There is a classical view of apologetics as simply a dry, intellectual type argument, the legal defence. Indeed this defensive role has been an important part of its role in Christian history, in a tradition from Justin Martyr's *First Apology to Objections to Christian Belief*.⁶ A defence was needed against attacks on the Christian faith either in terms of inaccurate assertions about the faith or intellectual challenges to the faith. For many people this is the main way that they think about apologetics. It may be assertions such as 'Christians believe in not one god but three gods' or it may be challenges such as 'How can you believe in a good God who allows suffering?' Such an agenda often dominates thinking and teaching about apologetics. In some theological colleges, apologetics is relegated to learning how to answer difficult questions about the Christian faith.

Such an approach is not just limited, it is dangerous. It can lead to intellectualism, exalting reason and intellect to the centre of Christian faith and

4 R. Fung, *Evangelistically Yours: Ecumenical Letters on Contemporary Evangelism*, WCC Publications, Geneva 1992, p 17.

5 C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Acts of the Apostles*, Volume II, T & T Clark, Edinburgh 1998, p 839.

6 A. R. Vidler et al., *Objections to Christian Belief*, Constable, London 1963.

mission. Yet reason alone cannot give answers to every question and reason alone does not represent Christian faith. Second, apologetics can soon become the domain of the experts, those who know the arguments, rather than being a ministry of the whole people of God. Third, apologetics can lead to a depersonalization of God, replacing the personal God of the Bible with a theoretical and logical system of thought and argument.

More importantly, this defensive style of apologetics is no longer appropriate to the culture we find ourselves in.

Of course there are attacks on the Christian faith. Richard Dawkins is enthusiastic in using evolutionary biology in attacking the Christian faith in his writing and broadcasting.⁷ A.N. Wilson⁸ and Ludovic Kennedy⁹ have gained a great deal of media coverage in attacking the historical basis of the New Testament. In addition, questions of truth in a pluralistic world and questions of suffering in a media dominated world provide difficult questions for those who believe in the God of biblical Christianity. Responses to these questions are needed and are extremely useful although mainly for those who are already Christians.¹⁰

Yet the balance today is more towards whether the Christian faith is relevant, rather than whether the faith is coherent. We are dealing with a question of irrelevancy rather than major attacks upon the faith. There may be spiritual hunger in western society but there is no sense that the church is the place to look for food.¹¹ Christianity no longer dominates the thought forms in our culture. The privatization of belief means that we are left with a personal belief system which has very little contact with the real world. The shift from public to private truth means that Christians take evangelism less seriously, and are constantly in danger of being totally immersed in a Christian sub-culture. It is interesting that in the debate concerning the broadcasting of religion, some Christians have protested that the terrestrial channels do not give enough quality time to religious broadcasting. In many ways, however, this is simply the consequence of a culture which sees Christian faith as irrelevant. The development of multi-channel broadcasting, and the growth of specific Christian cable channels or radio stations gives time to Christians but faces the danger of further pushing Christianity into being seen as a private hobby.

The work of apologetics today is to build bridges or points of contact. McGrath sums this up well in the title of his book on apologetics, *Bridge Building*. He writes, "The chief goal of Christian apologetics is to create an intellectual and imaginative climate conducive to the birth and nurture of faith."¹² McGrath is right to want to broaden the popular concept of apologetics. Apologetics needs to build bridges

7 R. Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker*, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1988; R. Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1989; R. Dawkins, *River out of Eden*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London 1995.

8 A. N. Wilson, *Jesus, Flamingo* 1993; A. N. Wilson, *God's Funeral*, Murray Publishers Ltd, 1999.

9 L. Kennedy, *All in the Mind: A Farewell to God*, Hodder, London 1999.

10 See for example, K. Ward, *God, Chance and Necessity*, OneWorld/Penguin, London, 1996; N.T. Wright, *Who was Jesus?*, SPCK, London 1995.

11 J. Drane, *Cultural Change and Biblical Faith*, Paternoster, Carlisle 2000, p viii; See also G. Hunter, *How to reach secular people*, Abingdon, Nashville 1992.

12 A. McGrath, *Bridge Building*, IVP, Leicester 1994, p 9.

between contemporary culture and the Christian faith. This is important not just in evangelism but also in the nurture of Christians.

It is important to note that such points of contact may simply need to be recognized as already being there. For example, within modern cosmology, there has been a revival of the design argument amongst scientists, many of whom would not call themselves Christians. In a series of books, Paul Davies has suggested on the basis of anthropic balances in the law and circumstance of the universe, the intelligibility of the universe and the sense of awe shared by scientists, that 'science offers a surer path to God than religion.'¹³

Stephen Hawking has achieved the cult status of appearing in both *Star Trek* and *The Simpsons* and has sold 10 million copies of a book which attempts to explain the first moments of the universe through quantum gravity.¹⁴ However, in doing so, he raises metaphysical questions as to the origin of the scientific laws and the purpose of the universe.¹⁵

This is not a revival of the old argument for design in order to provide a logical argument to prove the existence of God. It talks more of pointers than proof. Nevertheless it is evidence of the existence of bridges already in our culture. The challenge of apologetics is to identify more of these bridges – and indeed, to initiate the building.

Global perspective

At a recent seminar, a minister from Zambia told the story of how he had been asked to go to a particular tribe. He arrived with a translator and for a few days spent time trying to communicate the Christian faith. When he came to the point of Jesus being superior to the gods of nature, the tribe began to turn against him. While he was sleeping one night, his Bible and hymn book were stolen, and unknown to him at the time, thrown into the nearby river. While in prayer he felt the Lord was telling him to go to the river, so he went and prayed. I remember exactly the words that he then said to us, 'As I was praying my Bible and hymn book rose out of the water and flew at the members of the tribe who had come to see what was going on!' As the majority of us at the seminar were trained in the western context, you could almost hear the rumble of David Hume turning in his grave. Questions about the reliability of witnesses, rare events, and first hand experience intermingled with Newton's law of gravity. The minister however said, 'I know what you're all thinking, but it happened, and I was there.' He then went on to tell us of how many in the tribe came to Christ.

It was an important lesson. The questions about evidence and scientific laws are important but they were western apologetic questions. However, they were irrelevant to the tribe whose apologetic question was, 'Who is the most powerful? Was it the Lord Jesus who had raised the Bible and the hymnbook or the gods of nature?' As information technology and multi-ethnic societies shrink the global village to a global living room, apologetics needs to reflect a global dimension. This

13 P. Davies, *God and the New Physics*, Pelican, Harmondsworth 1983. See also P. Davies, *The Mind of God*, Simon and Schuster, New York 1992.

14 S. W. Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, Bantam, London 1988.

15 D. Wilkinson, *God, Time and Stephen Hawking*, Monarch, Crowborough 2001.

means that as western Christians we need to learn a little humility. We have a tendency to imperialism in our theology. Our apologetic agenda shaped largely by the western tradition of philosophy may not be the agenda of the world, or indeed the agenda of the increasingly culturally diverse nations. The growth and leadership of twenty-first century Christianity is increasingly located in Africa, South America and Asia. Christian apologetics needs to take this into account. We need to be careful not to impose our particular agenda upon the rest of the world and that means listening and learning from our sisters and brothers in different cultural contexts.¹⁶

At the same time in this global environment we have something to share. The questions of science, engaged by the western Christian tradition for many years, are now surfacing in other cultures, fuelled by the increasing dependency on technology. Some of our apologetic approaches in this area may be helpful to others around the world.

Stimulating the imagination

When Jesus meets a woman by a well in Samaria, he does not say to her 'My dear, you're a sinner, believe in me and you'll be saved.' His apologetic conversation engages the imagination. He asks her to imagine the kind of water that will never let her be thirsty again (John 4:1-15). In a similar way with Nicodemus, Jesus encourages him to imagine what it means to be born again. Indeed, when Nicodemus raises the rational question of relative sizes, Jesus wants him to go beyond that (John 3:1-15). Apologetics must not be simply the appeal to reason, but must engage the imagination.

Chris Carter, the creator of *The X-Files*, which explores the paranormal and UFO folklore, sees it as allowing his imagination to roam through the world of 'beyond the rational'. In fact there has been a debate about *The X-Files* within the scientific community. John Durant, the Professor of the Public Understanding of Science at Imperial College, argued that in fact this sort of pseudo-science was devaluing the truth of science. However, the respected science journal *Nature* suggested that *The X-Files* allowed people to explore with their imagination, and to be drawn beyond what we know. It is in this experience of wonder and curiosity that we are encouraged to pursue truth.

Apologetics has often been simply the domain of logical arguments. Yet narrative, image, poetry, dance, music and parable all need to be employed in building bridges for the Christian faith. They compliment the use of reason and often speak to people who do not engage in dialogue with the intellectual approach to apologetics. The artist is as important as the scientist or the lawyer in the art of apologetics.

In the Evangelical Alliance apologetics tour *The Truth About God and Science*, which drew audiences of well over five hundred, visual imagery was used as much as rational arguments. Images of the wonder of the universe caused a feeling of awe for many which went beyond the arguments. It had the power to stimulate

¹⁶ W. Dyrness, *Christian Apologetics in a World Community*, IVP, Wheaton, Illinois 1983.

the imagination, giving people a different perspective, allowing people to see themselves in a different way. The astronomer Kepler spoke of joy and being ravished at the creation. James Irwin on Apollo 15 said, 'Seeing the earth from space has to change a person, has to make a person appreciate the creation of God and the love of God'.

The challenge to us is whether our apologetics engages the imagination in such a way.

Maintaining humanity

The American missiologist George Morris tells the story of approaching four old men, to engage them in conversation and invite them to the 'revival'. However, they wanted to ask him a question first, 'Did Adam have a navel?' Morris laughed. One of the men said, 'You're the first preacher who's ever laughed at the joke. Most of them try to explain it to us. Why don't you sit down and we'll talk some more?'

The person has more power than the argument. In terms of apologetics in the media, it is right that we maintain the importance of not only *what* works on television but also *who* works on television. This is not just about who the most gifted or media friendly person might be; it is whether they demonstrate in their person the relevance and coherence of genuine Christian faith.

This is the power of apologetic witness. The very fact of the existence of leading scientists, sportspeople, entertainers, artists, engineers, politicians or others in the public eye who are Christians is a powerful apologetic in itself. The lay person may not understand all of the argument but will be impressed that these people are Christians in the midst of the arguments.

It is very easy for us to get wrapped up in the style of argument, the way of logic, or the medium in which to put all these things over. We can get tied up with trying to defend everything, but the apologist supremely needs to demonstrate humanity. Fundamental to Christianity is incarnation. If God is about becoming a person in Jesus in order to communicate on a personal level with us, so communication needs to be personal. We need incarnational apologetics.

The task of the apologist is not to triumph intellectually over people or to make non-Christian people look and feel foolish. The task is to care, to have compassion, to listen and to give. In Finney's survey *Finding Faith Today*, one of the key phrases is that people come to faith helped by those 'they trust'.¹⁷ There is something in apologetics about being 'trustworthy' as the apologist, and that means a tension between credibility and vulnerability. One has to be credible as an apologist in the sense that one has to know well both Christian faith and its relevance. This involves hard work in research, thinking arguments through, getting academic qualifications and learning how to communicate effectively.

Yet at the same time if we are to maintain humanity there needs to be a degree of vulnerability. As Drane comments, 'Two things characterize the early disciples, commitment to Christ and weakness in the face of the world.'¹⁸ Our vulnerability

17 J. Finney, *Finding Faith Today*, the Bible Society, Swindon 1992, p 46.

18 J. Drane, *Faith in a Changing Culture*, Harper Collins, London 1997, p 73.

as apologists is partly about us recognizing that we do not know all the answers. In apologetics in the twenty-first century, can we encourage that tension between credibility and vulnerability?

Developing the apologists

This simply follows from the previous point. If apologetics is to a large degree personal, then we need to take seriously the task of developing the apologists. We need to give time and space to developing not just the arguments, but those who will be key in doing apologetics.

That starts by using the expertise we have. Too often theological colleges ignore the backgrounds and achievements of those who come for training from the worlds of science, media, education, art, economics or technology. Yet a building on these backgrounds can provide powerful apologetics.

At the level of the local church, are we using the expertise of those within our congregations? A few years ago a number of Methodist lay people who were scientists in a church in south Manchester were enabled by the minister to address questions which were real to them and for which they provided the expertise. This small group exercise was important to them but also contributed helpfully to the wider debate.¹⁹ Within any congregation, people will be constantly engaged in apologetics in their work, leisure and relationships. They can only be supported by a vibrant community life in the local church. Small groups whether cells or housegroups are vital in providing support and a safe arena to explore apologetic questions.

In this, apologetics needs to be seen in a communal setting. Apologetics is not the work of the individual expert but is based in the community of the people of God. Even those with a particular expertise in apologetics need to be networked together.

In the future there will not be another C. S. Lewis. Lewis had that ability of drawing together and addressing so many different areas. However, knowledge is increasingly specialized and its rate of change is such that it is impossible for any one person to really fully understand that breadth of knowledge. That means we need groups of apologists working together, rather than individuals. We need to be prepared to give space and support to those who do apologetics. The person who will spend a great deal of time communicating through the mass media needs the understanding, prayer and support of the Christian community. The person speaking at the local youth group needs support and training just as much in order to have confidence in what they are doing. In the twenty-first century, how do we encourage people and build them up? World Methodist Evangelism in the US context has devised an 'Order of the Flame' which is for those who have particular evangelistic gifts. Those with gifts in evangelism are invited to a conference for a few days where they are encouraged, trained, prayed for and affirmed. They receive ongoing encouragement and affirmation in their calling which for some of them

19 D. Bridge (ed.), *God of Science, God of Faith, The Methodist Church Home Mission Division, London 1988.*

has not involved ordination. Maybe there is room for an order of people with particular gifts in apologetics – perhaps an ‘Order of the Question Mark’!

Using the opportunities

The missiologist Hendrik Kraemer once wrote that ‘communication involves the communicator having somehow discerned which are the obstacles to the receipt of the message, in such a way as to be able to meet the listener on her or his own ground.’²⁰ One could adapt the quotation slightly by adding ‘opportunities’ to obstacles.

If the apologetic task in the twenty-first century involves the question of relevance, then part of its practice is identifying what are the apologetic obstacles and opportunities of today, and indeed the future. What are the issues that are going to become important in the years to come? The task of the apologist is to learn to listen, hearing what people are asking, and anticipating the things that will influence people. Once again that is not an easy task. It involves an understanding of intellectual movements, a great sensitivity to popular culture in music, film and television, an understanding of the media and risk. That is where we need to begin. We need to listen and see the open doors for the gospel. In addition, if we take seriously the personal aspect of apologetics, each of us might build different bridges in different ways.

To illustrate this, consider two areas which do not immediately come to mind when thinking about apologetics, and yet are very fruitful. One is the whole question of aliens.²¹ In the late 1990s there were claims of life on the surface of Mars, and an increasing interest in science fiction, UFOs and alien abductions. Some of this was taken to the extreme in the growth of cults, but most of it remained at a popular level of fascination. This could be dismissed as a bit of fun or just too weird for theologians to interact with. However, there are important scientific questions involved ranging from the development of intelligent life to the uniqueness of human beings. In addition, in both the scientific community and in the ‘UFO’ and science fiction communities there are questions of loneliness, the purpose of the universe, human identity, fear, vulnerability and salvation. Furthermore, there are those such as Paul Davies who ask questions of the Christian faith involving the doctrine of incarnation in the light of other extra-terrestrial intelligence.²²

The second area is contemporary cinema. Hollywood blockbusters not only gross a large amount of money but also raise some of the big questions of existence with teenagers and those sometimes labelled as Generation X. For example, the Star Wars films of George Lucas embody the big questions of hope, the battle between good against evil, and the belief in transcendence. Lucas has been quite clear that he created Star Wars in part to get young people to think about the

20 H. Kraemer, *The Communication of the Christian Faith*, Lutterworth, London 1957, p 112.

21 D. Wilkinson, *Alone in the Universe? The X-Files, Aliens and God*, Monarch, Crowborough 1997.

22 P. Davies, *Are we alone?* Penguin, London 1995; and earlier discussions in E. L. Mascall, *Christian Theology and Modern Science*, Longmans, London 1956; W. N. Pittenger, *The Word Incarnate*, Nisbet, London 1959; S. L. Jaki, *Cosmos and Creator*, Scottish Academic Press, Edinburgh 1980.

question of whether God exists and what that God is like.²³ We may find such questions hard to identify in such popular entertainment but they are there, and indeed modern cinema is full of them.²⁴ How can we recognize these points of contact and build Christian apologetic responses to them?

One component is that we need to take pop culture seriously. Romanowski²⁵ has pointed out the church's fear of engagement with popular culture in terms of film, television and popular music. Part of the reason for this has been a separation between high and low art culture. Levine has detailed such a separation within western culture which affects education and the presentation of the arts.²⁶ Such a separation has also been true in the church, where the kingdom of God has often been associated with high arts such as classical music, while other art forms have been demonized.

There are opportunities for apologetics today building bridges in the areas of hope and eschatology,²⁷ genetic engineering and human identity,²⁸ the purpose and origin of the universe,²⁹ biological understandings of the nature of life,³⁰ and the care and status of the environment.³¹ Apologetics needs to address these areas not just at the academic level but also as they work out in popular culture.

In addition, we need distinguish between ethical and apologetic engagement with culture. A student at Cranmer Hall, Mark Saunders, in a study of role-playing games, shows that much of the church's engagement with the gaming community has been on the level of ethical concerns. For an apologetic approach he asks the church to rediscover its theology of imagination and play. In a similar way, Philip Plyming shows that a great deal of the Christian response to the success of the Harry Potter books has been asking questions about the suitability of the stories in terms of wizardry and morals. However, within the stories themselves are questions of human character, choices and redemption which can become bridges to the Christian gospel.³²

This means that using the opportunities in the twenty-first century will involve Christians who are media aware and media literate, and a theological understanding of imagination and entertainment.

23 D. Wilkinson, *The Power of the Force: The Spirituality of the Star Wars Films*, Lion, Oxford 2000.

24 R. K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality. Theology and Film in Dialogue*, Baker, Grand Rapids 2000.

25 W. D. Romanowski, *Pop Culture Wars*, IVP, Wheaton, Illinois 1996; see also W. D. Romanowski, *Eyes Wide Open: Looking for God in Popular Culture*, Brazos Press, Grand Rapids 2001.

26 L. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass 1988.

27 R. Bauckham and T. Hart, *Hope Against Hope: Christian Eschatology in Contemporary Context*, DLT, London 1999.

28 P. Moore, *Babel's Shadow. Genetic Technologies in a Fracturing Society*, Lion, Oxford 2000.

29 J. C. Polkinghorne, *Belief in God in an Age of Science*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT 1998.

30 A. Peacocke, *Paths from Science towards God: The End of all our Exploring*, Oneworld, Oxford 2001.

31 R. J. Berry (ed.), *The Care of Creation*, IVP, Leicester 2000.

32 P. Plyming, *Harry Potter and the Meaning of Life: Engaging with spirituality in Christian mission* Grove Books, Cambridge 2001, in press. See also A. Goddard, 'Harry Potter and the Quest for Virtue', *Anvil*, Vol 18, No 3, 2001, pp 181-192 and M. Masson, 'The Harry Potter Debate', *Anvil*, Vol 18, No 3, 2001, pp 193-196.

Bringing together the medium and the message

If the apologist is as important as the argument, then also the context in which the argument is delivered is often more important than the internal logic or brilliance of insight. The context is where we do apologetics. In Acts 17, Paul's context in Athens is the agora and the Areopagus. The challenge of such places is that the Christian is not in control. Relinquishing the power of evangelizing on our territory, means that in the pub, the television studio or the lecture theatre is where the real conversation begins. We are more vulnerable to being rejected, misunderstood or mocked, but our gospel is of a crucified Saviour.

The medium is also about the language used and the illustrations employed. The insights of feminist theology, black theology and liberation theology are not just about justice, but also about the kind of bridges that need to be built for effective apologetics.

Apologetics therefore needs to reflect a diversity of approaches. It must reflect the diversity of different ways of knowing, and the importance of role models and mentoring in evangelism and nurture. We need to note that the voice of women, with a few notable exceptions, is rarely heard in the public apologetic opportunities of broadcasting, publishing and speaking.³³ The same is true of those of ethnic minorities. Yet the medium needs to reflect the message in twenty-first century apologetics.

Holding together spirituality and reason

One approach to apologetics is to build bridges to people's spirituality. Such an approach is used for example in Rob Frost's apologetic to the New Age community.³⁴

Such an approach is an important corrective to much of the impersonal and intellectual approach of former apologetics. Christian faith is about personal experience. There was no one more concerned about objective truth and rational argument than the neuro-scientist Donald McKay. Yet he wrote 'The basis of a Christian conviction of the truth of his faith is not that he has solved an intellectual riddle but has come to know a living person, the person of Jesus Christ. It is this new relationship with God that makes the doctrine ring true, not the other way around. The reason that so many of us lack this conviction is I think, not that the evidence is not available, but that we look for the wrong kind of evidence in the wrong way. We look for facts and arguments instead of being prepared to be met by a person, at least so it was with me.'³⁵

However, today some may go too far in this approach. If in the light of postmodernity we reject any notion of public or objective truth then our spirituality becomes private and subjective. We need to hold together spirituality and objective truth in our apologetics. The component of Christian faith which is about evidence and reason is important. Indeed, many of the apologetic opportunities are still 'modernist' opportunities.

33 For an outstanding notable exception see C. Rees, *The Divine Embrace: Discovering the Reality of God's Love*, Fount, London 2001.

34 R. Frost, *A Close Look at New Age Spirituality*, Kingsway, Eastbourne 2001.

35 D. M. MacKay, *The Open Mind*, IVP, Leicester 1988, p 17.

For example, John Brockman writes, 'Many literary intellectuals have failed to make any serious encounter with modern science and have lost contact with the wider public through their obsession with the jargon-ridden theories of post-modernism. By contrast the run-in is now being made by leading scientists who seek to communicate directly with the public audience. Thus physicists such as Stephen Hawking and biologists such as Richard Dawkins now produce books that sell heavily and which exercise and influence over popular culture.³⁶ These scientists are talking about public truth and in this they are communicating directly with the public. Even people's obsession with aliens is often grounded in the need to want to provide hard evidence that we are not alone.

Paul Weston calls for gospel apologetics in the twenty-first century.³⁷ Resisting both the Enlightenment approach based solely on the evidential, and the postmodern approach based on my experience of truth, he argues we rediscover the biblical model which takes revelation seriously. This is a helpful way of holding together spirituality and objective truth in different cultural setting.

Understanding the theological base

Paul's theological base in Athens was very important. An understanding of God as Creator and Judge of all sustained him in the difficult situation. Biblical apologetics is not simply following the words and example of Jesus, but is based on who he is.

The Methodist leader Donald English was once asked where his confidence came from in terms of his regular contributions for *Radio 4 Thought for the Day*. He replied, 'My confidence comes from John 1, Colossians 1, Hebrews 1.' His point was that if you understand the nature of Jesus then apologetics naturally follows. Christ is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation, and in him all things were made and in him all things hold together. The incarnation of the eternal Word means that there is no area of human existence, no area of the universe that does not have a natural link with Jesus. Therefore you can build a bridge at any point in creation and eventually make the link to Jesus. In English's own book on preaching when he comes to apologetics he quotes a medical scientist who once wrote, 'Jesus is Lord. It is he by whom all things exist, it is he who choreographed the genetic quadrille in cell division, who scored the hormonal symphony and who heals the wounds we bind up and by looking to this Lord, the Doctor of Galilee, and sustainer of every galaxy, we can day by day calibrate our behaviour.'³⁸

The incarnation was central to English's own apologetic and evangelistic approach. For others the base may be more Trinitarian. However, it seems to me that a good test of effective apologetics is its connection to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. A growth area of apologetics especially in the US has been the intelligent design movement sometimes allied with creationist attacks on

36 J. Brockman, *The Third Culture*, Simon and Schuster, New York 1995, p 32.

37 P. Weston, 'Truth, Subjectivism and the Art of Apologetics', *Anvil*, Vol 16, No. 3, 1999, pp 173-185.

38 R. F. R. Gardner quoted by D. English, *An Evangelical Theology of Preaching*, Abingdon, USA 1995, p 56.

evolution.³⁹ Such an approach can be useful in challenging reductionist materialism sometimes associated with evolutionary biology. However, it can appear at times to be very negative and defensive, and often there is no connection to Jesus.

Conclusion

To preach the gospel beyond church walls in the twenty-first century will need apologetics, but a renewed form of apologetics which takes our cultural context seriously. It will need to be positive and diverse bridge building which listens as well as speaks. It will be sustained within Christian community and seen as a ministry of the whole people of God. Its motivation is not to make more members, but is the nature of the God who speaks.

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39 Eg. P. E. Johnson, *Darwin on Trial*, Monarch, Crowborough 1994; C. G. Hunter, *Darwin's God: Evolution and the Problem of Evil*, Brazos Press, Grand Rapids 2001.

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