

# IMAGINATIVE Apologetics

Theology, Philosophy  
and the Catholic Tradition

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# Contents

<i>List of Contributors</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>Foreword</i>	<i>xiii</i>
JOHN MILBANK	
<i>Introduction</i>	<i>xxv</i>
ANDREW DAVISON	
<b>Faith and Reason Reconsidered</b>	<b>I</b>
1 Proofs and Arguments	3
JOHN HUGHES	
2 Christian Reason and Christian Community	12
ANDREW DAVISON	
<b>Christian Apologetics and the Human Imagination</b>	<b>29</b>
3 Apologetics and the Imagination: Making Strange	31
ALISON MILBANK	
4 Apologetics, Literature and Worldview	46
DONNA J. LAZENBY	
5 The Good Serves the Better and Both the Best: C. S. Lewis on Imagination and Reason in Apologetics	59
MICHAEL WARD	
<b>Being Imaginative about Christian Apologetics</b>	<b>79</b>
6 Atheism, Apologetics and Ecclesiology: <i>Gaudium et Spes</i> and Contemporary Unbelief	81
STEPHEN BULLIVANT	
7 Christian Ethics as Good News	98
CRAIG HOVEY	

CONTENTS

<b>Situating Christian Apologetics</b>	<b>113</b>
8 Cultural Hermeneutics and Christian Apologetics GRAHAM WARD	115
9 Moments and Themes in the History of Apologetics RICHARD CONRAD OP	126
10 The Natural Sciences and Apologetics ALISTER E. MCGRATH	142
<i>Bibliography</i>	158
<i>Index</i>	165

# Foreword

## An Apologia for Apologetics

JOHN MILBANK

‘Apologetics’ now has unfortunate connotations. Demotically it suggests at worse saying sorry, at best a defence of a doubtful or compromised position. Technically it has come to mean a theologically secondary exercise: not the exposition of the faith, but the defence of the faith on grounds other than faith – on one’s opponent’s territory, where one risks remaining in a weak or even a false position. The best that such a posture can hope to achieve would be the occasional demonstration that one’s adversary has somehow missed the authentic wider ground of her own standing. But calling this very standing into doubt would appear to be beyond the apologetic remit.

For these reasons apologetics often fell into disfavour within twentieth-century theology. Instead, what was recommended was an authentic exposition of faith, capable of persuading the non-believer to start to inhabit the alternative world which that exposition can invoke. In this light apologetics appeared to be a compromised exercise, unlikely in any case to succeed. And yet, the latter assumption was belied by the wide popular reach of some apologetic writing, most notably that of C. S. Lewis – the sign of the success of his *Screwtape Letters* being that they were often much admired even by those whom they did not convince. Meanwhile, the recent rise of the ‘new atheism’ has left many ordinary Christians feeling that they need the assistance of an upgraded apologetic weaponry in the face of newly aggressive scientific assaults.

For both these reasons the time seems ripe to reconsider the apologetic role. And perhaps the first question to ask here is whether this role is really a secondary and subsidiary one after all. Perhaps the exposition of faith always includes an apologetic dimension? This might suggest that

any successful exercise of apologetics, like indeed that of Lewis, must contain a strong confessional element which convinces precisely because it persuades through the force of an imaginative presentation of belief. Conversely, however, this possibility would equally suggest that confession has to include a reasoned claim, just as ‘argument’ denotes both the plot of a narrative and the sequential unfolding of a logical case.

A brief glance at the history of the relationship between Christianity and apologetics supplies immediately a positive answer to this question. *Apolegein* in Greek means ‘to tell fully’ and therefore simply *to narrate*, with a fullness that is acquired from a slightly detached perspective, as indicated by the prefix ‘*apo*’ meaning ‘away from’, ‘off’, or ‘standing apart’. Therefore the very word would suggest that an *apologia* is the primary narrative testament of faith, yet with the interesting proviso that even an initial, committed, heartfelt, interior-derived confession must already stand somewhat apart from itself, rendering a reflexively felt judgement upon the spontaneously felt commitment to the Triune God and the incarnate *Logos*. From the very outset, therefore, the ‘*apo*’ in ‘apologetics’ calls to mind the ‘*apo*’ in ‘apophatic’ – etymologically the ‘away-disclosure’ of negative theology, or that caution in the face of mystery which alone allows a genuine adherence to mystery’s manifestation.

More specifically, *apologia* in ancient Greece referred primarily to the defence speech spoken at a trial, in contrast to the *kategoria* proffered by the prosecution. This pairing shows that the echo of ‘apophatic’ we have just noticed is matched by the echoing of the term for the prosecuting case by the term for positive theology: *kataphasis* or ‘down-disclosure’. In either case one has the sense of something being ‘pinned-down’, at least provisionally ‘located’. One can think here of our word ‘category’, but also of our word ‘catalogue’ since this derives from the more etymologically precise, if not legally opposite number to *apolegein*, namely *katalegein*, meaning to pick out, enlist, enrol, include, enumerate. So a ‘catalogue’ of one’s life or views on life might be a list of isolated events, achievements and propositions – unlike an *apologia* it would *neither* be a sequential story, nor a provisional attempt objectively to assess oneself and one’s commitments.

Perhaps surprisingly then, if an *apologia* is indeed an argument, it is also a narrative, and if it attempts to be detached, this is only because it springs from the most authentic heart of interior commitment.

And this turns out to be true of the three most famous legal defences in Western history, which are the three original sources for the true sense of Christian apologetics. First there is the *apologia* of Socrates as written by Plato. This was a defence before the city not only of the quest for a truth

that is prior to the city's foundation, but also of a certain unknowing as the condition for that quest which is not abolished by the quest's partial achievement.

Secondly, there is the defence of Jesus before Pilate. Here we have a denial by Jesus that he is a worldly rebel against the city, but, as with Socrates, the affirmation (at least in John's gospel) that he is witness to a truth beyond the city and beyond this world. But in excess of Socrates Jesus claims to be in some sense the King of an unworldly kingdom. Whether or not he is thereby the 'King of the Jews' he mysteriously leaves in the hands of human acclamation (Mathew 27.11; Mark 15.2; Luke 23.3; John 18.34). Beyond these points his defence is his silence and he does not elucidate Pilate's query as to the nature of truth (John 18.28–38).

In the case of both Socrates and Christ, therefore, their teaching is accentuated and has to 're-commence' as a *defence* before it can be an affirmation, precisely because it concerns a truth beyond all known legal and cosmic bounds, and therefore a truth that is threatened with legal and scientific exclusion. In speaking for the truth Socrates is consequently threatened by the city with death. In identifying himself as the truth and as the real ruler with a kind of casual indifference to the city's norms, Christ is likewise threatened with legal execution.

The third defence is that conducted by Paul before Festus and Agrippa in the book of *Acts* (Acts 25–26). This is explicitly described as an *apologia* (Acts 26.2). Paul's speech is at once a narration of his life, a justification of his learning and status, a 'saying sorry' for what he has done in persecuting Christians, including a certain 'excuse' in terms of his rigid Pharisaic commitment, and a confession of his faith in Christ. The 'full narration' of the latter includes most spectacularly Paul's account of his vision of the resurrected Christ and hearing of his words. So at this point his 'apologetics' contains a highly 'cataphatic' moment in which a vision 'comes down' to him in the middle of his journey. One could say that the inclusion of this moment indicates how an apologetic discourse which is primarily a narrative and a detached assessment can suddenly reach for the positive hymnic testament of the disclosing imagination and reception of apostrophising address. It is, one might suggest, the interweaving of all these things in Paul's speech which is convincing.

In all three cases then, 'apology' turns out to be *theologico-political* in some fundamental and constitutive sense. And yet this sense is thoroughly ambivalent: it involves a certain appeal beyond the city which is, and yet is not, against the city, which is indeed in some measure in its support, but which also leaves the city behind in its own vanity. What we have here is an apology *for the ultimate* and for the primacy of the

ultimate over the quotidian. And yet there is a certain caution in this apology, even a hesitating shyness. For no claim can be made fully to present the ultimate here and now, even in the case of Christ wherein God is fully shown and yet still secreted for now, since he is manifest in a human being. Hence the everyday and the customs and laws of the everyday remain respected even where they are condemned with the most ironical extremity.

Of the three defendants, Paul is of course the most forthright. And yet an aspect of reserved submission is shown in his request to be taken before Caesar, although it is clear that he would have been discharged by Agrippa and Festus. Rather than this being merely to do with the superficialities of pride in Roman citizenship, it is as if Paul is saying at this point that this contestation must now be between Christ and Caesar, between the Kingdom of heaven and the Roman imperial legacy. And yet this contestation ends in Acts with the banal anticlimax of Paul's long house-arrest in Rome – as though to say, this contestation is only just begun and will define the age between now and the final apocalypse.

In this respect, should we see it as merely accidental (symbolically and theologically) that the Caesar Augustus to whom St Paul submitted, the Emperor Nero, was the fourth successor to that first Augustus Caesar in the Julio-Claudian dynasty who, uniquely amongst emperors, left an *apologia* inscribed upon pillars of bronze outside his tomb: the *Res Gestae Divi Augustus*? – as if the historical irruption of defence against the city in the name of the eternal, beginning with the Incarnation during the first Augustus's reign, had already incited in *riposte* a new sense of the need to apologise for political coercion – whether by the internal judiciary or the external expropriations and military police actions of warfare? The Christian event would at once require such a counter-apologetics, though bring it under extreme suspicion, and yet again – given the reserve before quotidian law of the three defendants – not be necessarily always able to deny its cogency.

Apology as narrative, argument, confession and imaginative witness *by the human person* in the name of divine personality against the hitherto impersonality of the city – that is the very heart of Christian theology. This is why theology *began*, with Paul, Justin Martyr and Irenaeus as 'apologetics' – not just against pagan accusations and misconceptions, but also in continued expansion of Paul's defence of the God-Man, the infinite personality made flesh, before a human jurisdiction. A defence that continues, after Paul, to be a witness to the real eternal life of Christ's spirit, soul and body as untouchable by either time or finite verdict. But a defence that must therefore begin to elaborate an entire metaphysical vision that seeks to imagine a reality in which all is divine gift; in which

all creatures belong to an eternal kingdom that will overcome every kingdoms of this world.

The point then is that Christianity is a refusal to allow that the three trials are over, because they *always were secretly cosmic trials*. And because they are, still, cosmic trials, the act of political defence must here take the form of a new elaboration of metaphysics, as commenced by Plato, but now in terms of the disclosure of God as personal because interpersonal, and as assuming into himself his creation through his entire inclusion of one human being into the personhood of the divine Son. Thus in the course of his *Apologeticus* Tertullian first defined Christianity as *vera religione*, in a new linking of cult with philosophy that Augustine will later much further elaborate. Eventually it will have to be shown how this metaphysics – Christian *sacra doctrina* – better saves the appearances of everyday reality than does any other doctrine.

For it is at this point that the apophatic Christian *apologia*, out of its own internal structure, always *makes room for* the counter-apologetics for the quotidian. Jesus allows Pilate's questioning of truth to have the last word, precisely because he has not, as yet, fully answered this question; because the questioning still goes on and is even most radically instigated by the enigmatic presence of the truth in very person. For, since Christianity is not Gnosticism or Marcionism, its qualified world refusal will, even at the *eschaton*, allow the world a place, including a place for political law, in the sense of positive just distribution which the fulfilment of love itself requires. As W. H. Auden wrote, quoting Franz Kafka, 'God will cheat no one, not even the world of its triumph'.<sup>1</sup> At the end, indeed, the need for law as negative coercion and appeal to people's lesser or even base instincts will vanish; yet for now even this must be accorded some respect, else the innocent will not be able to live in freedom and true *apologias* will not be granted the civilised space in which they can be made.

What we are beginning to see then is that there are two seemingly contradictory things that must be said about the apologetic process. In the first place it is not that weazly, insidiously weak thing that so many imagine: rather it is bold proclamation and confession in the face of extreme danger. It lies at the very heart of faith and of theology. And yet, after all, in the second place, it introduces into that heart something complexly cautious and even ambivalent. It is indeed imaginative vision, but it is also apophatic reserve. As the former it instigates a new self-distancing of the world from the world's self – a felt need to render a counter-apology.

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<sup>1</sup> W. H. Auden, 'For the Time Being: a Christmas Oratorio', in *Collected Poems* (New York: Vintage, 1991), p. 400.



And yet as the latter it allows the world and the city of this world also to make a continued self-affirmation – albeit provisionally and only up to a point. This affirmation lies ‘outside’ theology – it is that with which theology is in apologetic dialogue – and yet, more fundamentally, it is not outside theology at all. For the distancing of the world and the city from itself is the difference made to it by theology, and in this very difference theology is able to sketch certain further more positive imaginings of the divine. The initial world-refusing here turns out to be a compassionate world-understanding that is yet more ultimately a world-transfiguring.

In the history of the English language, ‘apology’ initially meant defence; then it came to mean ‘excuse’; later still ‘acknowledgment of offence’ and finally, also, ‘a poor substitute’. And yet this entire development, one could claim, was always latent in the Greek sense of the word and its application in the course of the three trials. It has already the sense of ‘excuse’ for Paul in *Romans* (*Romans* 1.20 – the pagans are without any), while admission of the *appearance* of public offence is assumed by the legal settings. Finally, Jesus died because the crowd saw him as but a ‘poor substitute’ for Barabbas – ‘a mere apology of a law-breaker’, if you like – even though he was in reality the richest possible substitute for all of humankind.

All this negativity of connotation is indeed only breached and rendered convincing by our witness to this substitute for ourselves: the very instance of our positive imaginative envisionings of Christ. The procurator of Judea, Porcius Festus, already recognised the bizarre coincidence of cautious reflection and exorbitant claim involved in Christian *apologia* when he expostulated to Paul, ‘thou art beside thyself; much learning doth make thee mad’. To which Paul, who has just recounted the extraordinary events on the road to Damascus, implausibly replies, ‘I am not mad, most noble Festus, but speak forth the words of truth and soberness’ (*Acts* 26.24–25, Authorised Version).

Indeed we have seen how Paul nomadically located himself between the *élan* of personal vision and the allowance for the role of Roman judgement, just as in *Acts* he also allows for the role of Greek philosophical testament to the participated and parental God ‘in whom we live and move and have our being’ and of whom we are natural ‘offspring’ (*Acts* 17.28). And I have tried to argue how this shifting location between the defence *against* the world on the one hand, and defence *of* worldly *nomos* and worldly *logos* on the other, is not really a tension between Christianity and something else, but rather a tension constitutive of Christianity itself as refusing the Gnostic or the Marcionite path.

Perhaps no-one grasped this with more unsettling subtlety than the Victorian poet Robert Browning. Nearly all his characteristic dramatic

## FOREWORD

monologues take the form (in some measure) of apologias, which are never without extreme ambiguity. In his first long poem, *Paracelsus*, the message would seem to be that the speaking protagonist has tried to perfect the human race through power under the inspiration of romantic love, while wrongly despising the little that can be made of faint loves or even hates that conceal an unadmitted love at their hearts. And yet he is brought to the realisation that he is 'from the over-radiant star too mad / to drink the light-springs' by one 'Festus', whose very name surely invites caution in the reader who recalls Acts and another eponymous diagnostician of supposed insanity. This surely further invites her to read Paracelsus' final hope for a day when human advance through a mere refusal of the worst will be surpassed, and his own offer of full 'splendour' can be admitted on earth, as truly belonging to Christian eschatology parsed in terms of a magical or technological release of all natural powers.<sup>2</sup>

But in other poems by Browning this order of apologetic and of suspicious counter-apologetic is exactly reversed. Thus in *Fra Filippo Lippi* the painter protagonist offers us a counter-apology for his sensual inability to paint soul and spiritual symbol by persuasively suggesting that our only human way to these things must be through physical beauty, and that we need to be constantly reminded of this by a humbly mimetic art.<sup>3</sup> More complexly, in *Bishop Bloughram's Apology*, Browning's supposed satire on Cardinal Wiseman, we are drawn into a smug contempt for the Bishop's defence of a half-belief ensuring his own worldly comfort far more readily than any other *metier*, only to be drawn up short by the circumstance that this very crassness has given him an insight into the 'dangerous edge of things / The honest thief, the tender murderer, / The superstitious atheist, demirep / That loves and saves her soul in new French books.'<sup>4</sup> Similarly, we are easily led to despise Bloughram's offering to people of semi-mythological consolation, only to be once again surprised by his profundity in the face of the implications of the modern scientific outlook when he suggests that if we lose the idea of Pan's face appearing in the clouds, we will soon lose also our belief in the reality of the clouds themselves.<sup>5</sup>

Bloughram proves himself to be, despite everything, in this Protestant satire, the Catholic spokesperson for the half-hints of the sacramental

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2 Robert Browning, 'Paracelsus', Book V, in *Poems of Robert Browning* (London: OUP, 1912), p. 498.

3 Browning, 'Fra Filippo Lippi' in *Browning: a Selection*, ed. W.E. Williams (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), pp. 194–206.

4 Browning, 'Bishop Bloughram's Apology' in *Browning: a Selection*, pp 220–51; this quotation p. 232.

5 'Bishop Bloughram's Apology', p. 247.

and the halting virtue of the ceaseless resort to the confessional, which is perhaps why Wiseman famously did not take offence and later a Catholic novelist, Graham Greene could make Brougham's 'interest' on the 'dangerous edge' his very own. And yet of course this *apologia* for the unsatisfactory remains, in the end, precisely unsatisfactory, and has to be tempered by Paracelsus's reformed and alchemical *apologia* for the marvellous, the ideal and the utopianly transformative, despite his eventual admittance of Festus's tempering of this vision in terms of the prerogatives of the gradual and the partial.

This authentic Christian fusion and balancing of the apologetic and the counter-apologetic insofar as *both* are elements of apologetic itself (this being another version of the oscillation of the apophatic and the cataphatic) stands in stark contrast to the pathos of false apologetic as satirised by Browning in his *Caliban upon Setebos*, where the blind monster provides a 'natural theology' of his god, based merely upon projections from his own sensory experience and self-centred cravings.<sup>6</sup> All he can do on this basis is reason to a god who has created out of boredom and a need to exercise a playful cruelty. Imagination does *not* enter into this, except at the point where Caliban postulates a 'Quiet' beyond Setebos, whose goodness amounts at most to an indifference, at worse a favouring of Setebos alone – though Caliban recalls a rumour that Setebos may be demiurgically 'vexing' the Quiet. All merely natural theology, Browning implies, which falsely and idolatrously poses as a necessary adjunct to natural science (as if divine and material causality lay on the same univocal plane) is idolatrously like this, risking a reactive inversion to a Gnostic demonisation of the material cosmos. By contrast Bloughram is cynically nearer a genuinely pious consideration when he suggests that the creation exists in order to conceal God and prevent us from a premature confrontation that would be too overwhelming to survive.<sup>7</sup>

Instead of such a falsely 'neutral' approach (and one can think here of the folly of much 'science and religion' debate in our own day) which accepts without question the terms and terminology of this world, we need a mode of apologetics prepared to question the world's assumptions down to their very roots and to expose how they lie within paganism, heterodoxy or else an atheism with no ground in reason and a tendency to deny the ontological reality of reason altogether.

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6 Robert Browning, 'Caliban upon Setebos; Or, Natural Theology in the Island', in *Poems of Robert Browning*, pp. 650–5.

7 'Bishop Bloughram's Apology', pp. 240–1.

But such a mode of apologetics does not pretend that we have any access to what lies beyond the world save through the world and its analogical participation in that beyond. For this reason its mode is bound to be, like Browning's idiom, fragmentary and 'spasmodic' (to use the term applied to the now forgotten literary school which he largely despised and yet to which he himself undoubtedly helped to give rise). And yet, through and beyond our human spasms, this participation is consummated in the Incarnation where God and the world become one through a specific point and event of identification. And it is here that God himself in human guise offers an *apologia* for himself in both word and deed.

Christian apologetics must therefore always remain Christological. And this means true to an uncompromising offer of splendour which has once (unlike Paracelsus's pretensions) had the full divine power on earth, mediated from the outset by a sublime patience (which Paracelsus had to learn), of magical transformation of all things through mere verbal utterance – a power that is still faintly transmitted to us through the ecclesial offices. And yet true also to the memory of the refusal of this power by the world and its law and wisdom, and true once more to Christ's refusal violently to respond to this refusal – in the interests of a complete persuasive and demonstrative overcoming of this refusal in the end.

Since then, the Church has been adjured to remain faithful both to Christ's offer and to his refusal of violence in the face of rejection by the world, whose sphere of legitimacy he also recognised. But after the inevitability of the Constantinian moment, the Church has had fully to realise that the counter-apologetic belongs also to the apologetic and that the frailties of the human physical vessel, unlike the auto-rising body of the God-Man (since the power of the Trinity is undivided) means that the true interests of the human spirit cannot be entirely disentangled from the need to defend and keep the space of civil peace and order – think, for instance of the case of systematic attacks upon sacred buildings, whether by terrorists or regular forces.<sup>8</sup> The Church has tried to avoid and minimise coercive defence of its own polity, and must hold to the ultimate witness of preparedness to die for the eternal truth which needs not worldly de-

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8 No clear distinction between a 'just' and a 'holy' conflict was ever made before the early modern era, when the distinction then coincides with a dubious downgrading of international justice to merely procedural and not substantive criteria, even though Christianity did not, like Islam, usually or authentically (in Christian theological terms) endorse holy wars for purposes of religious expansion – the Crusades being – understandably, given the initial circumstances – viewed as a defensive enterprise. See Jonathan Riley-Smith, *The Crusades, Christianity and Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008) and James Turner Johnson, *Just War Tradition and the Restraint of War: a Moral and Historical Inquiry* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981).

fence, yet in the penultimate secular finality of crisis, the fate of State and Church, of physical survival and the very possibility of offering salvation here on earth have proven to be ineluctably and by no means altogether improperly bound up together.

In like mode, while the truths of the Creation, the Incarnation, the Trinity and of Grace, are replete of themselves, they complete and safeguard rather than destroy our sense of natural order and human dignity. This means that they themselves presume such a defence, and therefore that belief in these supernatural truths cannot survive the threatened collapse of the ordinary and perennial human belief in soul, mind and will, and its intuition of a teleological purposiveness in all existing things.

For this reason today apologetics, which is to say Christian theology as such, faces the integral task of at once defending the faith and also of defending a true politics of civic virtue (rooted in Platonic and Aristotelian assumptions), besides a renewed metaphysics of cosmic hierarchy and participatory order.

Yet today also we have a more specific sense that such a metaphysics was lost through an assumption 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 – like the road running outside our house which beckons to endless unknown vistas.

It is of course just this combination (and indeed this very image of the open road) which was recommended by the Romantic poet William Wordsworth who provided (like Browning later) such an inspiration for nineteenth century Anglicanism and for the new *apologia* for the ancient faith by the Oxford Movement in the face of English civil distortions. As Simon Jarvis has pointed out, Wordsworth's own poetic apology, *The Prelude*, reaches a point of consummation when he remembers himself, standing above the mists of the mountaintops in Snowdonia, as coming to the realisation that the power of the imagination, which is the whole force of the mind, is something that belongs objectively within nature itself as its very core and key to its underlying enigma:

The universal spectacle throughout  
Was shaped for admiration and delight,  
Grand in itself alone, but in that breach

Through which the homeless voice of waters rose,  
That deep, dark thoroughfare, had nature lodged  
The soul, the imagination of the whole.<sup>9</sup>

What Wordsworth here glimpses is an image of the imagination itself: within nature we often see a ‘domination’ revealed, or else one overwhelmingly impressive object, both of which call attention to the usually concealed primacy of *natura naturans* over *natura naturata* (‘nature nating’ over ‘nature natured’). It is this very shaping power which is most acutely shown in the natural object ‘humanity’, within whom, as ‘the imagination’, it similarly stands out in dominance over all other intellectual capacities. It is the imagination which intuits ‘the underpresence’ of God and can ‘build up greatest things / From least suggestions’, being ‘quickened’ but not ‘enthralled’ by ‘sensible impressions’ and ‘made thereby more fit / To hold communion with the invisible world’. It is this power which gives rise to religion and faith which concerns an atuned ‘Emotion which best foresight need not fear / Most worthy then of trust when most intense’.<sup>10</sup>

As with Paul then, it is the true exercise of the imagination which induces a paradoxically sober *furor* and guides and cautions our discursive judgement. But the vision of human imagination in the mountain cleft most truly attains Wordsworth’s desired collapse of the subjective into the objective and vice-versa, when it is the vision of Christ, the God-Man who exercised for our redemption the supreme imaginative act of recreation here on earth.<sup>11</sup>

A true apologetics negatively defends this imaginative action against assault by positively perpetuating its performance. It is this task which the authors of the present volume seek to renew in our time.

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9 William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: the Four Texts* [1798, 1799, 8105, 1850] (London: Penguin, 1995), [1805 version], Book XIII, 60–5, p. 512; Simon Jarvis, *Wordsworth’s Philosophic Song* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 214–23.

10 Wordsworth, *The Prelude* [1805], Book XIII, 66–122, pp. 514–16.

11 See Stephen Medcalf, ‘The Coincidence of Myth and Fact’, in *The Spirit of England: Selected Essays of Stephen Medcalf*, ed. Brian Cummings and Gabriel Josipovici (London: Legenda, 2010), pp. 20–40.

# Introduction

ANDREW DAVISON

The approach to apologetics offered in this book is imaginative twice over. There is an interest in the imagination in the more expected sense of ‘works of the imagination’: several of the authors consider the role that literature and the visual arts can play in apologetics. These might be works that illustrate the Christian faith, or argue for it, or they might be works further from the Christian fold, and here especially novels, that disclose something important about the cultural context within which we present the gospel.

Apologetics concerns faith’s appeal to reason. It is useful here to take a step back and consider the nature of reason. Our apologetics will be the better for it. Properly Christian apologetics requires a Christian understanding of reason. More than that, a theological account of reason is part of what we offer with the gospel. The Christian faith does not simply, or even mainly, propose a few additional facts about the world. Rather, belief in the Christian God invites a new way to understand everything.

There is therefore a second and more fundamental interest in the imagination among the authors of these chapters. Going beyond the imaginative work of the creative few, they insist that all *human reason is imaginative*. Throughout this collection there is an enquiry into the nature of reason and the role, within it, of the imagination: is reason wide or narrow, warm or cold, only a matter of logic, or of imagination also? The contributors remind us that reason both knows *and desires*, and that these two aspects lie very close together. As Thomas Aquinas put it, ‘truth is something good, otherwise it would not be desirable; and good is something true, otherwise it would not be intelligible’.<sup>1</sup> God satisfies both the intellect and the desire – he is both true and good – which is why apologetics should embrace both.

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<sup>1</sup> *Summa Theologiae* I.79.11 ad 2. References are from the 1920 translation by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 22 vols (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne).

A Christian vision of reason will let go of neither intellect nor will. Intellect is important; although the ‘New Atheists’ portray Christian commitment as an absurdist leap in the dark, it cannot be that. Christianity is, after all, the religion of the Word, the *Logos*. We therefore rebuff the New Atheists not for being too rational but rather for *not being rational enough*. Their reductive account of reason suppresses the impulse to ask *why*; it ignores too many important features of the world. As Denys Turner has said, the best way to be an atheist is to avoid asking certain questions.<sup>2</sup> Sure enough, New Atheist polemic curtails reason, turning to a caricature of the (supposedly singular) method of the physical and natural sciences. It praises the inquisitiveness of scientists but discounts inquisitiveness in theology, ethics or metaphysics. The result is an unimaginative reason that is therefore incompletely reasonable.

In this book we celebrate reason, but not so as to make apologetics rational in some cold or arid fashion. Apologetics should be a matter of wonder and desire, not least because reason at its most reasonable is itself a matter of wonder and desire. It is the work of the apologist to suggest that only in God does our wonder reach its zenith, and only in God do our deepest desires find their fulfilment. The apologist may labour to show that the Christian theological vision is true, but that will fall flat unless he or she has an equal confidence that it is supremely attractive and engaging.

These chapters go under the subtitle ‘theology, philosophy and the catholic tradition’. The authors put a high premium on theology. This goes hand-in-hand with our shared sense that apologetics cannot be a matter of *technique*. Apologetics is not an instrument to be deployed upon the person with whom we are speaking, not least because that fails to take each person’s particular personhood sufficiently seriously. Rather, authentic Christian apologetics should resemble authentic Christian morality as portrayed within the ‘virtue’ tradition of ethics: the best Christian apologetics is the product of a thorough immersion in the Christian tradition combined with careful attention to the person with whom we are speaking and the context in which we find ourselves. As a consequence, training in apologetics is inseparable from the business of learning the faith (what we might call ‘catechesis’). To make this apologetics–catechesis link is not simply to say that apologetics should be part of any comprehensive programme to teach the faith in our churches

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<sup>2</sup> ‘How to be an Atheist: An Inaugural Lecture Given in the University of Cambridge 12 October 2001’ (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Reprinted in Denys Turner, *Faith Seeking* (London: SCM Press, 2002), pp. 3–22.



(although it should be). More fundamental still, it is to say that the best way to be prepared to explain and defend the faith is to have learned it thoroughly, to have thought it through seriously, and to have made proof of it by living according to its vision of the world.

That is to say something about how and why these chapters are ‘theological’. Many are also gently but decidedly philosophical. This arises from the conviction that everyone is a philosopher at heart, and from its corollary, that the best philosophy relates to the topics closest to the heart of every human life: love and loss, birth and death, good and evil, transgression and redemption. The philosophy most worthy of its name – the ‘love of wisdom’ – never wanders far from such theological questions. To be an apologist is to accompany our fellow searchers as we consider whether the Christian faith, or atheism, or any other worldview, does or does not make sense of these matters.

Where these chapters are philosophical it is because knowledge of philosophy is quite simply *useful* for the apologetic task. We can turn again to Thomas Aquinas, who suggests two reasons why it is worth thinking about philosophy for the purposes of apologetics: philosophy both helps Christians to understand their own faith and helps them to understand the positions of others.<sup>3</sup> When philosophy is ruled by theology, and not the other way round, it helps us both to think about Christianity clearly and to think our way into non-Christian understandings of reality. Both of these approaches are to be found in these chapters. Most of all, the authors are enthusiastic about philosophy because they believe that the Christian faith offers the best of all philosophies – the best way to understand the world and what it means to be human at its fullest breadth.

These chapters are *theological* and often *philosophical*. The third part of the subtitle refers to ‘the Catholic tradition’. Christian theology today is an ecumenical endeavour, which is an enduring benefit of ecumenism in the twentieth century. Most of the contributors to this volume are either catholic-minded members of the Church of England or Roman Catholics; all of the authors would admit their debt to classical catholic thought. We have found in that tradition treasures theological,

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<sup>3</sup> Both points are made in *Summa Theologiae* I.1. Sacred teaching ‘can in a sense depend upon the philosophical sciences, not as though it stood in need of them, but only in order to make its teaching clearer’ (5 ad 2). Aquinas later notes that appeals to Scripture are ineffectual if the person with whom we are speaking does not accept its authority: ‘there is no longer any means of proving the articles of faith by reasoning, but only of answering his objections — if he has any — against faith’ (8 resp). In order to answer these objections it is useful to understand his or her philosophical worldview. This is also helpful when it comes to pointing out internal inconsistencies.

ANDREW DAVISON

philosophical and imaginative. We hope these chapters will bring some of what we have found to the attention of readers of all traditions. Nor, given our emphasis on the imagination, do we wish to forget the original sense of the word *catholic*, as meaning ‘whole’. We argue for a version of Christian apologetics – theological, philosophical and ‘catholic’ – that embraces the whole of human reason and takes an expansive view of what it means to be a human being.

# Proofs and Arguments

JOHN HUGHES

*John Hughes argues that 'modern' apologetics often seems at once both too modest and too arrogant. It is too modest in thinking that the question of Christian faith is just another question, about some more 'facts' within an otherwise self-evident world, rather than something that changes the way we think about everything. And it is too arrogant in thinking that we can attain 'proof' of these ultimate matters, as if we could step outside the limitations of our human reason. For Hughes, this modern approach to apologetics is complicit with an ahistorical, uncritical and anti-Christian account of reason. To illustrate this, and help us find a way out of this cul-de-sac, he recounts the history of how we got here, arguing that such narratives and genealogies of thought are an important part of the apologetic task. For Hughes, beyond both modernist foundationalism and postmodern relativism, faith may be incapable of proof in the narrow sense, but it is no less rational for that.* **A.D.**

If apologetics is partly about arguing or persuading people to believe the Christian faith, then it is worth stopping first of all to think about what we mean by 'argument', 'proof' and 'persuasion'. This touches on some of the big questions of what is sometimes called 'fundamental theology' or philosophical theology, questions such as: the limits of reason, the nature of faith, arguments for and against the existence of God. For reasons that will become clear in a moment, I would like to explore these questions by way of a little historical story, before leading into some more general contemporary conclusions.

This story begins not so long ago, perhaps 20 or 30 years past. In those days, perhaps especially in the English-speaking world, everyone seemed to have enormous confidence in reason and common sense. Whether they were believers or atheists, they shared a common set of basic assumptions about what was reasonable and so were able meet each other on this safe, common playground. This made philosophy of religion very easy: you could simply line up arguments for and against questions like

the existence of God, the problem of evil and all the rest, and simply make up your own mind on the balance. Down at the street level, this overflowed into the more confessional business of popular apologetics. There was quite an industry of popular books of apologetics that aimed to prove the things of faith to ordinary people on the basis of simple rational arguments. If you were Roman Catholic, these things would normally begin from ‘natural theology’, and the so-called ‘proofs’ for the existence of God, usually based upon the *quinquae viae*: the five ways of Saint Thomas Aquinas. Any sensible person could observe motion, causation, contingency, teleology and hierarchies of excellence in creation, and so they could deduce from this their Origin and Goal, *quod omnes dicunt Deus*, ‘which everyone calls God’.<sup>1</sup> If you were Protestant on the other hand, your apologetics would usually begin by demonstrating the rationality of revelation, whether this was proving the Bible’s authority from prophecies that have been fulfilled, or its authenticity from biblical archaeology, or the evidence for the resurrection of Christ, often considered in the manner of a legal trial. Both these traditions can be seen merged in the figure of the former Nolloth Professor of Philosophy of Religion at Oxford University, whose influence continues to be disturbingly widespread. Richard Swinburne famously claims to calculate the statistical probability of the existence of God and the resurrection of Christ.<sup>2</sup> It is worth pausing to consider this for a moment. This is problematic, to put it mildly, not only in that these calculations clearly fail to resolve the matter (or else why would there still be atheists), but also absurd in suggesting that the existence of God and the resurrection of Christ are things whose probability can be measured like any other ordinary ‘thing’ in the world, in the same way one might wonder about the existence of an ancient Greek battle or another planet in our solar system, rather than something *much* more fundamental which alters one’s entire view of *everything*. Swinburne’s efforts, and many similar attempts were of course honourable in intent, building on a long tradition, and various people continue them today (Alvin Plantinga among Protestants, and Scott Hahn among Roman Catholics), but they reached some quite curious and problematic conclusions as we have suggested.

We can trace the origins of this project of proofs back through history to understand where it came from, before we go on to see how it may have run aground. This project of proving the foundations of

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<sup>1</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, Ia q.2, a.3, rep.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004); and *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003).

faith by reason goes back into the nineteenth century, where we find the First Vatican Council affirming on the basis of Neo-Scholastic philosophy that the existence of God is a truth that can be known by reason unaided by grace or faith. In Anglican circles a similarly confident rationalist natural theology was represented by William Paley's famous analogy of the watch found on the beach, from which one can deduce the existence of a watchmaker, which remained a staple of Anglican textbooks well into the twentieth century. But the project goes back before Pius IX and Paley, enjoying its heyday in the eighteenth century, with such supremely confident rationalists as Leibniz and Wolff, and arguably taking off even earlier, in the seventeenth century with the so-called 'founder of modern philosophy', René Descartes. Descartes famously sat alone in his boiler room, stripping away all potentially doubtful beliefs founded upon traditional authorities such as Scripture or the Church, in order to find a common, neutral, indisputable rational foundation upon which everyone could agree. This 'Cartesian method', of using doubt to find certainty, supposedly born in reaction to the European Wars of Religion, was to become classically modern. This is what people sometimes call 'foundationalism', the quest to find a rational foundation 'behind' all the different views people have, upon which they must all agree.<sup>3</sup>

The point to be made here is that the project of trying to 'prove' God's existence and the truth of the Christian faith, according to supposedly 'pure' reason, while it might have precursors, is not so ancient as we might think, but actually belongs to this particular philosophical project, which we call modernity and the European Enlightenment, and more specifically to rationalist foundationalism. If this is so, then we might well have good reasons for being more than a little suspicious of its hidden agendas and unseen consequences.

The first thing to note is that it simply does not seem to work. Hume and Kant in the eighteenth century famously spelt out the problems with the cosmological and teleological 'proofs' of God's existence: Why could there not just be an infinite regress? Why does someone have to start causation and motion off? Is it legitimate to argue from patterns within a series to explanations for the entire series itself? The order in the universe is at least as susceptible to being read in terms of organic generation or chance as it is in terms of design. And so on. This debate was summed up by the famous encounter between Bertrand Russell and Fr Copleston,

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<sup>3</sup> See Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); and Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

when Russell insisted that the universe needed no explanation beyond itself but ‘just is’. There is nothing to prevent the atheist sidestepping the argument’s premises in this way. If these are ‘proofs’, then they seem to have failed.

The second thing to notice seems to me to be more important for apologetics today, but less frequently commented upon. This is the pernicious consequences of this rationalist foundationalism for faith. It was some of the Romantics in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century who first noticed that if you made the Christian faith into something that could be proved by reason, one effectively placed reason above faith, belittling faith in the process. In the twentieth century, Karl Barth made a similar point in his attack on natural theology, which, he argued, required God’s revelation to be squeezed into the meagre categories of our human reason. For this rationalist foundationalism, faith now seems to be characterized as dealing with the most *uncertain* things, rather than the most important. Belief in God is presumed to be self-evident, so no longer requires the will to be combined with the intellect as in ancient accounts of faith, so it is no longer really a free response. Other beliefs, which are still based on faith, such as those deriving purely from revelation, now look rather vulnerable by comparison. Most crucially God himself is reduced to just another, very big ‘being’ among others, on the same plane as everything else, and subject to the same laws, such as probability. The mysterious timeless, simple, unchanging God of the Fathers and medievals has become the ‘Supreme Being’ or the ‘Ultimate architect’ of the eighteenth-century rationalists. This rationalist, foundationalist project of proving God’s existence has unwittingly smuggled the Christian God out of the back door and replaced him with the cheap imitation god of the deists. Such a *deus ex machina*, a god of the gaps, is largely useless and readily dispensable, so from here it is but a short further step to atheism, to Laplace’s famous remark to Napoleon, ‘I no longer have need of that hypothesis.’ Michael Buckley has brilliantly traced these developments from natural theology through deism to atheism in his book *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*.<sup>4</sup> Much more could be said about this sub-Christian view of God, particularly in relation to the voluntarism that made him seem like a capricious tyrant. It is arguably *this* god, not the Christian God, whom John Robinson wanted to leave behind in his *Honest to God*, and whom Heidegger rejected under the term ‘ontotheology’. Some have traced him back before Descartes

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<sup>4</sup> Michael J. Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990).

to Duns Scotus and his doctrine of the univocity of being. But that is another story.<sup>5</sup>

The point that should be grasped is just that the rationalist project of proofs has sold out the Christian faith to deism and turned the God of Jesus Christ into an idol of human reason. There is a crucial issue here about our fundamental views of the world, which applies just as much to secular worldviews as religious ones: the foundation of one's belief cannot, by its very nature, be based on some other foundation without that becoming the more ultimate instead. So if one proves God on the basis of reason then secretly one establishes reason as the more ultimate foundation and thus the real object of worship. The other consequence of this is that worldviews are essentially incapable of proof, because the only possible premises come from within the system itself. The views themselves determine what would even count as evidence; one's ultimate stance affects the significance of every possible 'fact'. *All* ultimate questions, our positions or existential stances upon them, are therefore supra-rational, incapable of proof. They are more than empirical; they are properly hermeneutical, questions of interpretation. How important it is to remind secularists of this, again and again!

But to return to our historical story, foundationalism has not only been rejected in terms of religion, it has now come under considerable attack in all areas of knowledge. Beginning with Nietzsche's attack on the notion of one absolute truth in the nineteenth century, this critique of rationalism has gained strength throughout the twentieth century, first in Continental philosophers such as Heidegger and Derrida, to become mainstream in the last 30 years in what people loosely call 'postmodernism'.<sup>6</sup> It is easy to get caught up in debates over definitions here, but if we can see modernism as characterized by the assertion of human freedom and scientific reason against tradition and authority, an era which climaxed with the enthroning of the pagan cult of Reason in Notre Dame during the French Revolution, then much of this era seems to have come to an end. Now, it seems, the rationalist attempt to establish consensus through an appeal to universal reason has been deconstructed and unmasked as in fact just one particular way of looking at the world (Western, scientific, male, dominating and so on). Science is no longer the paradigm of all knowledge, and indeed many philosophers of science point

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<sup>5</sup> See Catherine Pickstock, 'Duns Scotus: His historical and contemporary significance', *Modern Theology* 21 (2005), pp. 543-74.

<sup>6</sup> See Graham Ward (ed.), *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

out that even science does not have the universal ahistorical certainty that some have pretended for it. All knowledge is embedded in time and space. Our knowledge always begins not with some universal foundation but ‘in the middle of things’. So now, the tools of deconstruction, questions such as ‘where did these ideas come from?’, ‘whose interests do they serve?’, ‘what voices are being silenced here?’ are no longer simply used against theology, but are turned back upon the secular rationalism that had attacked it. Theology may be in a strong position here, as the first area of human knowledge to face up to these challenges, the limitations of its own certainty. The ball has now returned to the rationalists’ court. We may no longer be able to prove God, but perhaps proof and the particular sort of rationalism that went with it has had its day more generally. We are no longer quite so sure about the infinite progress of the march of reason, sweeping away all other traditions and authorities before its advance.

Does this mean that we are all postmoderns now? Has reason had its day? It sounds like all we are left with is fideism, the arbitrary decision, the leap of faith. Some existentialist Christians and Barthian Protestants, and non-realist postmodern theologians such as Don Cupitt, have found they could make themselves at home in the postmodern world in this way, but at what cost? Disturbingly, it sounds as if there can be little point in apologetics, in any discussion and conversation with other people, on this account, because after all everybody has their own particular view and nothing could persuade them to change it. If we cease to believe in rationalism, do we throw out all belief in reason and truth? If so, we are left with nothing but the bleak self-assertion of millions of different perspectives, Nietzsche’s will to power. This is the anarchy of complete moral, theological, political and philosophical relativism.

This sort of postmodernism seems after all to be not so different from modernism, just an extension of its basic premise of individualistic freedom to fit with the more extreme forms of consumer capitalism that have developed in the last 50 years or so, as Terry Eagleton and others have argued.<sup>7</sup> It is not surprising then that we treat our worldviews just as we treat everything else, like commodities to be purchased from our global pick ‘n’ mix and consumed until we grow bored with them. This sort of postmodernism is not only politically sinister, it is also contrary to basic Christian beliefs such as the idea that God is Truth and that the Christian faith is not just a private language, but can and should be shared with everyone. More fundamentally, we can argue that this sort of

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<sup>7</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).



postmodernism is internally incoherent. Inasmuch as it claims that there are no truths, only perspectives, it reveals the hidden truth that it does actually have its own fundamental belief which positions all the others; and insofar as it still bothers even to engage other positions in dialogue, it shows a commitment to the very possibility of communication and changing one's mind, which can only be understood as a hangover from the belief in something like Truth. We would be foolish to sell out to postmodernism after all.

It is not simply that we can use deconstruction against modernist rationalism, we can also deconstruct the irrationalism of the postmodernists. This was the strategy of Alasdair MacIntyre in his books *After Virtue* and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*.<sup>8</sup> MacIntyre proposes that we take on board the postmodern critique of rationalist foundationalism, but that we should not abandon reason altogether. He points to the practices of the medieval university as embodying a commitment to ultimate truth, mediated through specific socio-historical traditions and authorities, yet precisely because of this belief, open to dialogue with all seekers after truth. In this situation there may no longer be room for proofs, because there are no longer common foundations upon which everyone agrees; the starting points may be many and various. But there is still the possibility of real debates and discussions, more modest and pragmatic arguments, based on the partial and provisional acceptance of certain non-ultimate premises. MacIntyre demonstrates this method in the way he plays the rationalism of the Enlightenment off against the irrationalism of the postmodernists. He has no knock-down proofs against them, but he can employ a complex series of attacks: situating them genealogically, unmasking their agendas and inconsistencies, allowing them to deconstruct themselves and one another. And because we are creatures of flesh and blood rather than pure intelligences, these arguments will persuade us not by some irrefutable logic, but also by all the powers of persuasion, by their goodness and even their beauty. They will be arguments which must be enacted in our lives as well as in our words. But if they are authentic then their rhetoric will persuade by virtue of their *inherent* beauty and goodness, rather than because of some added spin or window-dressing. Form is not accidentally related to content: the medium must fit the message. It may well be that these are the sorts of arguments that will be appropriate for a twenty-first century apologetics: not proofs, but critiques, genealogies and

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<sup>8</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 2003); and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

explorations, persuasive and attractive narratives that help us to make sense of our intellectual and cultural situation and inspire us to participate in them. For those today who would be teachers and preachers of faith, we must learn again the importance of rhetoric, and not as mere wordmongering, but as the art of faithfully performing our proclamation of the faith.

Many of the more ancient arguments for the existence of God, whether Anselm's or Aquinas', can be rehabilitated within this more modest rationalism: not as unquestionable proofs, but as arguments that draw out the logic of a certain position or line of thought, that lead people from particular phenomena, such as contingency or degrees of excellence, towards the idea of God. Many have taken Anselm's famous phrase to describe this more modest project of apologetics: *fides quaerens intellectum*, 'faith seeking understanding'. Faith is not completely irrational after all: reason and faith can collaborate together. Faith can deploy a more modest reason in its service, and this more modest reason may well even lead people to faith, without being able to 'establish' it. Indeed, one of the most powerful arguments that might be made in favour of faith is that the common-sense notions of reason that we take for granted are historically derived from and only really make sense in relation to faith in a God who has rationally ordered creation. Nietzsche here can help us see that if people are going to be consistent in abandoning God then perhaps they should abandon belief in truth and goodness as we have known them as well.

Perhaps particularly in the last ten years or so, we have seen a revival of Christian philosophy, of a certain modest Christian rationalism beyond secular rationalism and postmodern irrationalism. The encyclical *Fides et Ratio* can be read in this way, as can the more general revival of interest in metaphysics.<sup>9</sup> Some have even argued that faith and reason belong so closely together that they are more or less indistinguishable: reason is always a certain leap of faith, while faith is always a certain sort of rationality.<sup>10</sup> If this is so, then the old boundaries between apologetics and dogmatics begin to fall down. Whereas 30 years ago, we might have been convinced by the postmodern relativists that we had heard the last of apologetics, it now seems that *everything* is apologetics! Christian faith can articulate itself only through an engagement with culture. *All*

<sup>9</sup> See John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1998), Peter M. Candler Jr and Conor Cunningham (eds), *Belief and Metaphysics* (London: SCM Press, 2007); and D. Stephen Long, *Speaking of God: Theology, Language, and Truth* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> See John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle* (London: SCM Press, 2005).

## PROOFS AND ARGUMENTS

God-talk, from formal theology, to the liturgical proclamation of the word, to the conversations in pubs and cafes, should be apologetic; not in the sense of establishing common neutral foundations for faith, but in setting forth the Christian faith in a way that engages with, criticizes and responds to the other views that are current in our world, and that is attractive and persuasive in itself.