

TOWARD A RATIONAL APOLOGETIC BASED UPON HISTORY

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If the Gospel cannot be sustained by historical data, it cannot be sustained at all. Myths and fables may be immune to historical investigation if only because they are in essence a-historical; but the incarnation of the Son of God belongs to the flesh and bone of history. The religions of the East have little concern over facts and dates, history and time. They are too concerned with inner feelings to be interested in matters of mundane objectivity. But Christianity is of a different breed, and the centre of its focus is the historic Jesus Christ. For this reason Christian apologetics is as concerned with the incarnation as theology is; because that event is capable of yielding both the content of our theology and the grounding of our apologetic. "The Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world" (1 John 4:14). The strongest case for Christian theism rests upon its historical credentials. Undoubtedly a radical critique of the presuppositions of modern man can lead to an effective unmasking of his thought and bring to his attention the damning accusations of the Law. But it is a display of the incarnation datum which most effectively confronts him with the gift and the demand of the divine Gospel.

Preaching the Gospel is not "a sheer kerygmatic activity," as Mascall reminded Karl Barth (*Secularisation of Christianity*, p. 12). Similarly the British agnostic Antony Flew at the very outset of his examination of Christian theism took strong exception to Barth's dictum: "Belief cannot argue with unbelief: it can only preach to it!" Anglo Catholic and atheist alike are absolutely right. If no *case* can be made out for accepting the Christian Gospel, there are no grounds for inviting men to do so, nor indeed for holding to it ourselves. Daniel Wilson wrote in 1829: "It is one mark of the truth of our holy religion that it courts enquiry. Christianity lays open its claim to every one that asks a reason of the hope which it inspires, and declines no species of fair investigation." To decline any verification procedures would amount to, as Flew points out, a kind of religious racism which would sunder human solidarity itself, and cut off forever all possibility of fruitful dialogue. The "offense" of the Gospel is not the pain of leaving one's mind at the door of the Church; indeed this is scarcely hurtful at all to our contemporary irrationalistic generation. The dialectical theology with its pervasive concept of paradox plays right into the hands of the surrealist, psychedellic, and existentialist mentality. The offense of the Gospel is its condemning judgment upon the sinner and his culture, its bankruptcy and its myths. That Christianity can be shown to be true gives the sentence its credibility and force. Camus wrote: "It is those who know how to rebel, at the appropriate

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moment, *against history* who really advance its interests." (*The Rebel*, p. 302) Religion in its twentieth century guise has divorced its subject matter from every empirical test, and sold out on the goodnews of Creation and Redemption. It is the moment to stand up and say a very distinct "No!" to the concerted attempt to bury meaningful apologetics in our day. There is a veritable cafeteria of clues to the meaning of the universe available. There are many faiths competing for man's allegiance. It is not a simple wager between faith and unfaith. Unless there be good reason to hold to one's chosen faith, there is no basis for its propagation. If the Gospel be not offered on an intelligent, rational basis, it must be offered on an unintelligent, irrational one, in which case a decision for Christ becomes a mindless whim, a mere self authenticating existential and arbitrary act of the will. The Gospel is about historical facts. Unless these can be examined and tested, preaching loses its integrity and conviction. John Locke once wrote: "I find every sect, as far as reason will help them, make use of it gladly: and when it fails them, they cry out, 'It is a matter of faith, and above reason.'" The flight from reason in current theology is a *failure of nerve*. Our day calls for more apologetics not less.

Unfortunately *absurdism* in apologetics has a long history. Tertullian, in reaction to classical philosophy, indulged in polemical overstatement: "I believe because it is absurd." Obviously such a statement taken seriously would underwrite every sect from the Black Muslims to the Church of Satan. Similar sentiments are expressed by mystics in the middle ages (e.g. Bernard of Clairvaux, admired surprisingly enough by a modern evangelical of like temperament, A. W. Tozer). The nature and grace schema of St. Thomas (not wholly unlike the faith-knowledge dichotomy of the neo-orthodox theology) came strongly to imply at the hands of the nominalists that faith was by definition irrational. Blaise Pascall did much to extend this unfortuante line of thought. His famous wager is quite unsound. He argued to this effect: since God is hidden and man's reason damaged through sin, it is not possible to prove that he exists. However, Pascall challenged his countrymen to wager. If he exists, you hit the jackpot; if not you lose no more than anyone else. If he does not exist, you neither win nor lose. Let us hear the comment of Walter Kaufmann to this. "What Pascall overlooked was the hair raising possibility that God might out-Luther Luther. A special area in hell might be reserved for those who go to mass. Or God might punish those whose faith is prompted by prudence. Perhaps God prefers the abstinent to those who whore around with some denomination he despises. Perhaps he reserves special rewards for those who deny themselves the comfort of belief. Perhaps the intellectual ascetic will win all while those who compromised their intellectual integrity lose everything." (*Critique of Religion and Philosophy*, No. 49) In a similar vein Antony Flew points out that there are several hell-consigning Gods to choose from. (*ibid.* p. 185) Dr. Montgomery properly calls this kind of wager by the term "Russian roulette." (*The Altizer-Montgomery Dialogue*, p. 39ff)

A meaningful wager involves weighing odds and making an intelligent calculation. If no evidence is available to inform one's decision, there can be no true wager. Pretending that there is does no credit to Altizer's case (nor for that matter to Carnell's). (see Altizer, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*, ch. 5; Carnell, *An Introduction to Christian Apologetics*, p. 357f) There are not just *two* possibilities. There is the Roman Catholic God, the Muslim God, and the Mormon God besides. We must know Christianity is true *before* we wager, otherwise the challenge has no force.

There is not space to calculate the harm which Kierkegaard has done to the discipline of Christian apologetics. He is the father of modern irrationalism, Christian and non-Christian. He has injected certain concepts into modern theology which may take another century to work out of her system. e.g., the risk of faith, the absolute paradox, truth through encounter, revelation as exclusively personal, the hidden God, etc. All these have contributed to the emasculation of apologetics.

The nature of the evangelical task in apologetics falls into two traditional sections, general revelation or natural theology, and special revelation or revealed theology. Men have a right to know, and we have the responsibility to show how cogent the Gospel is. At the level of general revelation it is proper to solicit the witness to God in creation (Psalm 19:1 Romans 1:19f). It may well be that evangelicals have more in common with Thomists than they do with Kantians, and ought to give much more thought to the specific content of general revelation. Hand in hand with a positive metaphysics is a negative one. It is painfully apparent at the present time that the optimistic humanism of Renaissance man is dying. Although there is an oscillation between existential despair and new forms of irrational hope, our generation is seriously asking, "Is there life after birth?" Today's prophets are secular: Francis Bacon, Eugene O'Neill, Albert Camus, etc. Manishness is our first point of contact with modern man. Gustav Mueller sums up the dilemma: "Every finite existence in the world is doomed to fail, to disintegrate, to die, and to be forgotten. If, then, reality is identified with finite existence, if there is no genuine transcendence of any kind, then the result is a bitter and pointless rebellion, "no exit." Finitism is nihilism." Evangelicals must overcome their shocking cultural barrenness if the radical unmasking of the natural man is to be achieved effectively. Every Christian need not be a full fledged literary critic; but the Christian community could at least try harder to provide an atmosphere where cultural interests are encouraged not shunned. Ironically those best acquainted with our culture have no answers for its dilemmas, while those who know Christ is the answer seldom rise above glibness and cliché.

By beginning with existent man, and observing the sheer agony of seeking to function in the world without God, we press toward the awful of his naturalistic presuppositions, and at a certain point propose Jesus

Christ as an effective Savior from such dilemmas. We start with the secular, with man's experience of being in the world, and thence direct him to the threshold of faith where Christian evidences operate. For there is a line of unbroken continuity which exists between his secular experience and the terms of the Gospel. "What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes." (James 4:14) There is no human solution to the human problem. The only answer for a mortal enmeshed in guilt and finitude is to be related to a Savior who is also Lord of time and creation.

In the area of the Gospel and special revelation, the subject matter for apologetics is the incarnation, and its cornerstone the historical validity of the Gospel. Modern theology has sought to disengage itself from history, but evangelicals must always refuse to do so. The Old and New Testaments alike insist that the faith of God's people rests upon what they have seen of his objective, mighty acts. The gift of miracles was for the direct purpose of validating and attesting the servants of God and the truth of their messages. The same pattern emerges in both testaments, that divine revelation is accompanied by supernatural indicia, namely, prophecy (supernatural knowledge) and miracle (supernatural power). The beauty of the Gospel consists precisely in its openness to investigation and verification. God revealed himself in time-space history. Jesus Christ his Son was a public figure, and his resurrection a public event. Scripture knows nothing of trans-, supra-, or meta-history. God showed himself in ordinary history, and it is there we bid men seek and find him today. (see my *Set Forth Your Case*, Craig Press, 1967).

At times the Holy Spirit himself is made a party to the shameful disparagement of rational Christian apologetics. However, the work of the Spirit has to do with the reception of the truth not its validity. He creates the capacity for faith, but does not invent the truth itself.

One might as well say that photography is independent of light, because no light can make an impression unless the plate is prepared to receive it. The Holy Spirit does not work a blind, ungrounded faith in the heart. What is supplied by his creative energy in working faith is not a ready-made faith, rooted in nothing, and clinging without reason to its object; not yet new grounds of belief in the object present; but just a new ability of the heart to respond to the grounds of faith, sufficient in themselves, already present to the understanding. We believe in Christ because it is rational to believe in him, not though it be irrational. For the birth of faith in the soul, it is just as essential that grounds of faith should be present to the mind as that the Giver of faith should act creatively upon the heart." (intro to *Apologetics*, by F. R. Beattie, Richmond, 1903, p. 25).

Of course an appeal can be made to the soul which is not formally rational in its presentation. For the Gospel makes its appeal to the whole man, and an emotional participation in Christ often precedes for many

any deep understanding of its terms. Indeed religion is a subject about which few people find it possible to be rational. Nevertheless, the historical, factual content of faith is primary to the existential in the Gospel. If the personal and cognitive functions of faith become separated, they ought quickly to be reunited. For the non-Christian needs to know the logic of his dilemma and the cogency of the Gospel which alone can save him. We cannot proclaim Christ in our age without apologetics. The approach we recommend presses the claims of Christ home in the most Biblical and compelling fashion.