

Explain yourself: Making belief intelligible

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Karl Barth famously attacked apologetics—the attempt to offer a persuasive account of Christian belief on mutually agreed-upon grounds of reason—as a misguided task, part of the failure of theological liberalism. When you focus on making sense to those outside the faith, Barth warned, you end up adopting their worldview. When you lean way over to speak to the secular world, you end up falling into it.

If Barth's analysis doesn't make you shy away from apologetics, the crude way that apologetics is often practiced may do so. Books like Josh McDowell's *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* or Lee Strobel's *The Case for Faith* overstate the rational basis for faith. Even C. S. Lewis had his bad days operating in this field. His famous remark that Jesus was either who he said he was or a liar or lunatic appears to present a logical choice, one that directs the reader toward faith. But are there really only three options? Such syllogisms produce few believers and even fewer lovers of God.

Apologetics has largely lost its place in mainline seminary curricula. But the task of apologetics—making Christian belief intelligible—remains inescapable. If it isn't done well, it will be done badly.

The postmodern claim that all truth is relative to a context or tradition has created a new situation for apologetics. All that postmodern apologists need to do is show that their opponents also stand in a particular tradition that has its own unverifiable presuppositions. Science, for example, rests on presuppositions like this one: "The world is governed by natural forces and everything can be explained if we understand these natural forces." This is a philosophical presupposition that is not falsifiable and therefore not subject to scientific inquiry.

Postmodern apologists can be divided into two schools, the humble and the bold. The humble apologists simply want to argue that the Christian way of life is the most desirable way of life, on the basis of the kinds of people that the belief system fosters. If a belief system creates a cantankerous neighbor or a militaristic extremist,

then few people would want to embrace that individual's belief system. As Origen argued in an earlier age, Christianity must be true because it creates the best people. Justin Martyr pointed out that Christians promoted peace in the empire and paid their taxes, didn't commit adultery or kill or abandon their children. Humble apologetics is often an argument about ethics, with lots of examples.

The bold apologists aim to show that their account of the world makes better sense of it than all other accounts and that non-Christian belief systems collapse from inner contradiction. The bold apologists might look at the Darwinist concept of survival of the fittest and argue that Darwinism cannot account for the phenomenon of love. Why are so many people willing to sacrifice themselves for the sake of someone else and not just for their own survival? Darwinism, the argument goes, cannot account fully for the way we experience the world. By contrast, the Christian story of creation by a good God and of humanity's fall into sin is able to make sense of why people are capable of both love and evil. And it can answer the question "Why is there something rather than nothing?" with "Because God created the heavens and the earth."

Francis Collins, former director of the National Human Genome Research Institute and author of *The Language of God*, is something of a hybrid apologist. He doesn't try to show that science is inadequate, only that it isn't adequate by itself. He aims to show that both science and faith are necessary to explain the world. For Collins, science answers questions about the natural world and faith answers questions about the spiritual world; the tools for exploring one world are not appropriate for exploring the other.

This clear separation of realms has been called into question by many postmodernists, who see more fluidity between science and religion. So in one sense Collins fails to question modernist assumptions. Nevertheless, he attacks the views of scientists such as Richard Dawkins who think that science leaves no room for faith and that science has shown belief in God to be a delusion. One of the world's leading scientists, Collins insists that faith is not incompatible with science. The two are simply answering different questions. Science cannot explain the existence of the moral law within every person, which is the most convincing evidence for faith. Only faith can explain why people universally have a sense of right and wrong.

Compared to Collins, Dinesh D'Souza is definitely a bold apologist. Responding to the recent atheist manifestos by Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris,

D'Souza writes: "This is not a time for Christians to turn the other cheek. Rather it is a time to drive the money-changers out of the temple." In *What's So Great About Christianity* D'Souza seeks to equip comrades for battle, though at times the reader may wonder why D'Souza's help is needed, since according to him "God is the future, and atheism is on its way out."

If God is the future, that is no thanks to liberal Christianity, according to D'Souza. Liberal theologians are "the world's missionaries to the church," clamoring in behalf of women's rights and gay marriage. D'Souza dispatches liberals with H. Richard Niebuhr's famous summary of the tenets of liberal Christianity: "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross." It's a great line, but D'Souza doesn't seem to realize that Niebuhr himself is the patron saint of generations of theological liberals. D'Souza is also a bit hazy on some basic facts. (Apparently intending to describe divisions in the Episcopal Church, he notes that "traditional Christians" from mainline denominations have aligned themselves with new structures in Ghana and the Ivory Coast. Surely he means Uganda and Rwanda.)

In D'Souza's world, only Christians care about combating famine or resisting genocide: "Most people in other cultures are unconcerned." He also asserts that "modern science is an invention of medieval Christianity, and the greatest breakthroughs in scientific reason have largely been the work of Christians." Never mind that Muslims carried the load of Western science for a millennium and that Jews have won more than their share of Nobel prizes. Even more troubling are such theological excursions as this: Jewish monotheism was "generally unthreatening to Roman paganism." (D'Souza apparently has not heard of the Jewish revolts of AD 70 and 135.)

For D'Souza, Christianity's genius was distilled into Immanuel Kant's philosophy and John Locke's politics. Christianity brought to the world moral norms that can be made universal, he says. He also contends that church teachings helped bring about Western laws seeking to prevent ill-advised concentrations of power. D'Souza's book makes no mention of the Trinity or the incarnation, which one might think fairly important to orthodox Christianity. His tool kit for faith is little more than a set of talking points for debating Hitchens.

Better works of apologetics are being written. One of them is Timothy Keller's *The Reason for God*. Keller is founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in

Manhattan, a congregation of the Presbyterian Church in America. Though the church has many young professionals among its members, it is startlingly traditional. Keller assumes that young urbanites are up for serious conversations about faith. At one point in his ministry he would stick around after worship for an hour to take questions.

A striking contrast to D'Souza (who opens his book with an epigraph from *Star Wars*' Darth Vader: "I find your lack of faith disturbing"), Keller readily grants that there are obstacles to faith, and he can be unsparing in his critique of Christians. He admits that religion may fuel violence and that churchgoers may be weak people who need a crutch. He says the answer to religious and irreligious fanatics is a different kind of fanaticism: the world needs people who are "fanatically humble, sensitive, loving, empathetic, forgiving, understanding—as Christ was." Keller thinks that what makes Redeemer Presbyterian different is its love of "irony, charity, and humility."

Keller's version of traditional Reformed faith seems to be effective in Manhattan. John Calvin's insistence on the saving efficacy of Christ alone, apart from any human work, touches the souls of young achievers trying to climb the career ladder. One can imagine them paying attention when Keller proclaims, "Your career can't die for your sins." And he can grant Christians' failings precisely because, for him, Christians don't claim to be the best people: we claim to have the greatest Forgiver.

The book is not without its problems. Keller lets Christians off the hook a little too quickly for their sins. For some reason he blames the Crusades on Anglo-Saxon paganism, and he insists that the cross can't be used to support violence (of course, it often has been used that way). Like other apologists, he seems unwilling to grant that someone really can be an atheist deep down. In his chapter on proofs for God's existence, he argues that the reader already believes in God, even if she doesn't know it. He repeatedly claims—wrongly—that the critique of religious people as narrow and arrogant is inevitably no less narrow and arrogant itself.

But Keller is on target when he argues that those who oppose "absolute truth" often do so from their own position that at least implicitly claims absolute truth. And he often skillfully deploys theological moves that liberals may not have encountered—as when he says that believing in a God of judgment is actually a hedge *against* violence, since revenge can be left in God's hands, not human ones.

Lying somewhere between D'Souza's boldness and Keller's and Collins's humility is N. T. Wright and his book *Simply Christian*. The New Testament scholar draws on his scholarly resources to address apologetic questions. For example, he argues that Christianity can explain people's universal desire for spirituality, community and beauty. Wright commends Christianity for offering a true vision of justice that overcomes the clamoring for vengeance. He argues that people's quest for spirituality and community cannot be fulfilled by mere material and psychological means, because we were created for relationship with God and one another. At key points in the book, Wright shows that much of the way people understand the world stems from the presuppositions of modern and postmodern worldviews. Christianity provides a vision of the world as it is and where it is going that calls these presuppositions into question. By revealing the presuppositions of other worldviews, he is able to present a uniquely Christian vision of the world that is also persuasive.

Wright's title suggests that his book is an attempt to update C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*, and the Anglican bishop of Durham does have something of Lewis's knack for producing an unforgettable image or phrase. He says those who make arguments for God's existence are like people who point a flashlight at the sun and run the risk of ending up like the women who went to Jesus' tomb—with a living God on their hands rather than a dead one. Wright also shows that Christianity need not be wed to conservative politics or doctrinal narrowness: on the cross the living God took on massive injustice, yet did not "lash out with threats or curses." For Wright, the bodily resurrection of Jesus serves God's work of "putting the world to rights." Caesars and pharisees of the religious right should shiver in their shoes at news of a living, embodied savior (while Gnostics of all types concentrate on some world other than this one). This is vintage Wright—clear, compelling, zeroing in on the problems in the church and world.

Yet compared to Lewis's work, the book feels all too churchy. When Wright compares praying without a structure to mountaineering without shoes (it can be done, but by very few), it's a striking and helpful analogy—if one is already worried about how to pray. Wright reworks for popular consumption his scholarly investigations of the resurrection and the meaning of *messiah* in Jesus' day, but again these concerns are more relevant to Christians than to outsiders. The marvel of Lewis's book is that it can be handed to someone outside Christianity in the confidence that it will prompt a fresh look at the faith. Wright's writing is simply pitched a little too high.

Conservative apologists of old (and their current imitators, like Strobel) operated on the basis of evidentialism—the idea that we can and should believe only what can be supported by empirical evidence. Many conservative apologists today recognize that postmodernity has altered the terms of discussion. No longer is it obvious what constitutes evidence. A sign of this trend is InterVarsity Press's *New Dictionary of Christian Apologetics*, which has entries on many theologians and philosophers as well as on topics ranging from abortion to worldviews.

All the book's articles take the concerns of postmodernity and pluralism seriously, and the first 50 pages address the contemporary challenges of doing apologetics. The writers agree that apologetics in a post-Christian culture involves articulating basic theological tenets. Apologetics must contend for the uniqueness of Christianity, not simply the existence of a generic God or Designer. Rather than arguing for a Creator in general, Christian apologetics will argue for the trinitarian God revealed in Jesus Christ. And it will emphasize the importance of arguments that point to the uniquely Christian way of life.

The unique Christian vision must be judged according to the extent to which it accounts for the world. Judging between competing visions of the world is not the same as proving the truth of one or the other. Judgment requires knowing the issues intimately and making a well-informed decision. A courtroom judge must know the factual evidence of a case, the relevant laws and previous court decisions, and be able to discern the character of the persons involved. Likewise, apologists and their interlocutors must be wise in judging between competing accounts of the world.

Christians have always had to engage in apologetics—to give an account of the faith to those who inquire. In doing so, Christians inevitably reframe the faith for themselves. Done as it should be, apologetics renews the church as it reveals the plausibility and even the beauty of faith. Done poorly, it can turn off believers and unbelievers alike.

The postmodern insight is that there are always competing versions of what counts as rationality. Arguments about faith do not float free of cultural context or individual experience. Nor do the arguments considered here float free of individual stories: Collins, D'Souza, Keller and Wright are very different people who operate in different disciplines and social roles. Character precedes argument—something that Origen and the other patristic writers recognized. If Christianity is true, it creates faithful and generous-hearted people. If it isn't doing that, all arguments fail.

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