

Apologetics Approaches

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Introduction

“Apologetics” is the defense of a position and has its roots in ancient history particularly names like Plato come to mind. The defence of the Christian faith is now inevitable in the light of unprecedented attacks from all angles within and without the faith. Instead of defending the faith, some theologians have sold their birth right ending up rejecting the very faith they initially set out to fence. In order to undertake the honourable task of apologetics, the saint must be aware of the various options on offer and settle for one they are most comfortable with, as long as, in their view, it honours God. Admittedly, each position taken has its strong pundits and thus one must be very clear why they elect a given position. In this paper, we examine these various options and then make a conclusion, leaving the reader to make an informed decision.

What apologetics is

The word “*apologetics*” is derived from an ancient Greek word, *apologia*, used by ancient Greek Philosopher (Plato) who wrote a work attempting to defend himself against the accusation of his adversaries. Although he was not successful in saving his life, his *apologia* stands as a monument of a potent defence of a position from which we can learn. The word therefore has come to be used in Christian circles to denote one that defends the Christian faith from internal and external attacks on the existence and nature of God, the scriptures and the faith in general. People often perform some form of apologetics in daily life although they may not be aware. The Christian apologist however is one that is specially trained with a view to defend the faith as they go about disseminating the gospel. Apologetics is of different sorts and carried out from different perspective and positions. This paper gives a bird’s eye view of what apologetics does and the extant approaches available to the Christian seeking to learn and engage in this noble activity.

Approaches to Apologetics

Although Christian apologetics aims at defending and affirming the faith, it has different approaches to it. First, apologetics is of two sorts: negative (i.e. a

defence from attack) and positive (i.e. affirming and establishing the faith). Second, approaches to defending the faith vary though the goal is one largely depending on one's noetic structure and world view. Third, the major brands of apologetic approaches are broken into two broad categories though others can be said to equally exert some considerable influence. The categories are briefly stated here but elucidated more clearly later in this paper: Evidential and presupposition. While one allows for empirical evidence and testing to take place before accepting claims as true, the other strongly objects to this approach asserting that the scriptures alone are the basis and measure of all things. The evidential approach is thus inductive while the presupposition approach is deductive. More details as we progress but in the next point, we briefly highlight some key apologetic epochs through the corridors of the centuries.

Apologetics through the ages

The Christian church has had to contend for the faith right from inception. The case is no different today, if not more critical and complex. The injunction in Jude 3 and I Peter 3:15 are thus relevant to the saint today. However, to be sure and draw more confidence, it is fitting that we carry out a bird's eye view survey of the history of apologetic through the centuries. Dr John Battle has done a good job on this matter in one of his book (i.e.in chapter three) and as such a good portion of the content presented in this section is derived from his work. To kick start this survey, it is important to mention that this is not an exhaustive review but merely highlights the key figures that have shaped Christian apologetics, albeit in varying modes but all aimed at glorifying God. We commence our brief enquiry in the first century onwards to the present period and then proceed to another section. This is done in point form in the table below:

Name(s) of key apologist	Epoch	Period in history	Comment
a. Tertullian, Eusebius, Ignatius, Titian, Melito of Sardis, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Justin Martyr, Polycarp b.	The apologist era	1-4 century	
Athanasius, St	Medieval era	5-15 century	John of

Augustine, John of Damascus, Anslem of Canterbury, Abelard, Peter Lombard, Roger Bacon, Raymond Lull, William of Occam and Thomas Aquinas			Damascus was first apologist against Islam
John Calvin, Joseph Butler and William Paley	The Reformation era	16-17 century	
William Henry Green, James Orr, Robert Dick Wilson, CS Lewis, BB Warfield, Charles Hodge, Cornelius Van Til and Greg Behnsen	The post reformation era	18-19 century	
John Montgomery, Norman Giesler, Alvin Plantinga, FF Bruce, John Gerstner, Ronald Nash, John Frame, Jay Smith, Ravi Zacharias Josh McDowell, Logan Nyasulu and Francis A. Schaeffer	The Post-modern era	20-21 century	
Henry Morris, John Whitcomb Jr, Ken Ham, Robert Newman and Hugh Ross	Creation scientists		
William Dembski, Michael Behe, Michael Denton and Philip Johnson	The Intelligent Design school		

This table represents the major epochs over the centuries and what impact they have had on defending the faith.

What Others have Said about Respective Apologetics Approaches

Apologetics is increasingly an important area of engagement as more and more Christians realise its importance and what they are up against, a fallen rebellious world. As the ancient religious garb wears out in the once strongly Christian hubs like America and Europe, replaced by damnable syncretic or naturalistic religion, the need cannot be greater. Thankfully, an army of defenders of the faith, in the Spirit of the pioneering apologists akin to Justin Martyr of the second and third centuries have arisen. They have relentlessly valiantly fought for truth right across the world and etched a respectable place for the faith, of course not without effects. However, they have had various approaches, which may be broadly classified into four major systems (as stated by Kenneth D Boa), with two prominent ones. Boa states that the following apologetic approaches exist with their strong proponents: Rationalism (e.g. Norman Geisler); Evidentialism (e.g. John Montgomery); presuppositionalism (e.g. Cornelius Van Til) and finally, subjectivism (e.g. Karl Barth, Pascal Blaise). In the two major schools (i.e. Evidentialism & Presuppositionalism), he explains their approaches, giving their apologetic approach and style. Interestingly, there are variations even in each given school of thought! For our purposes, we point our broad categories. According to Kenneth Boa, Evidentialism insists on evidence for support for Christian claims from an inductive perspective. This apologetic commences from a presupposition or method (of enquiry) rather than of substantive content. In other words, it does not assume the Bible or their claim are true but collates evidence from all places including the scientific method, archaeology, history, miracles, witnesses, the resurrection, other writings, astronomy, philosophy etc. and then compares with Biblical claims. With a few insignificant exceptions, this school holds that the evidence points to the truthfulness, veracity, accuracy and reliability of the scriptures and therefore inspiration. These evidences, this school claims, can be a powerful apologetic to get the world's attention and therefore bring some to the faith though these evidences in themselves have no effectual inherent power to transform. They are a mere logically convincing contact point, given the complex mind set. What is more is that even the apostles used an evidential approach as they consistently referred to live witnesses as well as the fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the case of Paul, he even '*reasoned*' with the Greek Philosophers of his day, ultimately pointing them to Jesus Christ (Acts 17:2ff). Major pundits of this school include John Montgomery, BB Warfield, Charles Hodge, Clark H Pinnock, Josh McDowell, John H Gerstner among others. The other major school is the presuppositional which claims that the Christian faith does not need any external evidence or aid outside the scriptures to be credible. The basic epistemology runs something like this: *God has spoken in his word and we are to arrive at truth deductively rather than inductively as some people claim for this would be to distrust the inspiration of God's word therefore reducing it to human standard levels.* But the scripture is simply what it claims to be-The word of God (I Thessalonians 2:13ff) and is to be accepted as such. To expect a non-regenerate person, affected by the fall to accept scripture for what it is or claims is to expect too much because they are dead to spiritual

realities (Ephesians 2:1-3). The Holy Spirit must enlighten one to believe the special revelation of God as revealed in the scriptures. Anything outside this scope is of human origin and therefore inherently impotent to trigger faith in a person. Although science and the evidences around us may supposedly demonstrate what is true (because they are merely revealing what God's word has already stated or implied), these cannot and must not be relied upon in our apologetic. Many adherents of this school are inerrantists as regards the scriptures because the Bible claims to be inspired, authoritative and a rule of life. The leading champions of this school include Cornelius Van Til, Ronald Nash, Greg L. Bahnsen, John C Whitcomb Jr, Abraham Kuyper, Carl H. F Henry, Gordon Clark, Francis Schaeffer and a whole host of Biblists.

But there is another school of apologists that fall into either categories, the Philosophers and Creation scientists. The latter group is split into two camps, the young earth and old earth Creationists. Dr Henry Morris and Dr Whitcomb represent the Young earth creationists holding on to the literal seven day creation as stipulated in the Bible (Genesis 1 &2) while Dr Ross and Dr Chalmers represent the old earth creationists which suggests that the earth is indeed older than it looks because the Genesis account has not been correctly interpreted. For instance, they claim that the "day" in Genesis is not literal but refers to a long period of time, even millions of years. Further, they argue that in between Genesis 1:1-2, there must have been a cataclysmic event that wiped out the dinosaurs generating the gap theory etc. The scope of this paper does not permit us to explore this area further.

As can be seen, not only has Kenneth D Boa written about the various schools but a perusal of each apologetic's own writings demonstrates exactly what they hold. For instance, John Montgomery has been a prolific writer and highly influential in evidential circles while Van Til heads the presuppositional school. The Christian rationalist Norman L Giesler has written a good apologetic text called *Christian apologetics* which is well worth the read where he highlights the general schools of thought eventually critiquing each of them before giving what he perceives as the correct view.

Lessons Learnt from this Consideration

Many lesson scan be gleaned from these schools of thought in order to equip the saints for service. Below are some of the salient thoughts which this writer picked up as he scanned the writings on this important subject matter:

1. Apologetical systems differ and so are approaches within the same given school.
2. The Christian must be aware of these differences and select an approach that is closest to scripture and thus God honouring.

3. One's noetic structure (i.e. worldview, structure of thinking, frame of thinking etc.) affects one's apologetic approach. For instance, if one is an evidentialist, chances are higher that they may reject faith without empirical verifiable evidence. We may further suggest that an evidentialist is more likely to be intellectual and even reject inerrancy of scripture, though not in all cases.
4. God has revealed himself in general and special revelation, the latter leading to salvation in Jesus Christ.
5. Philosophy has its inherent limitation in apologetics. It examines things from within. What it does is to expose weaknesses and inconsistencies in an apologetic logical reasoning (e.g. a wrong premise or flawed argument whether self-defeating or so) but it belongs to other apologetic tools/approaches to show the correct direction.
6. The evidences adduced by the evidential school to support a position are not 100% certain but give greater probability and thus worth paying attention to.
7. There have been different apologists raised by the Lord over the ages each making a significant contribution in their own right.
8. Evidential apologetics holds that we need verifiable evidence from as many sources as possible to prove the truth and relevance of the Christian faith. Sources of proof include Philosophy, Miracles, Natural theology, fulfilled prophecy, The Resurrection, The Incarnation, Historical evidence, uniqueness of the Bible, The Bible and science, archaeological findings, the scientific/empirical method, Phenomenon of Israel, exoteric and esoteric experiences, regeneration, the transformed apostles after the resurrection, Jesus' claims (e.g. about his divinity), the empty tomb etc, etc.
9. The Presuppositional approach rejects any proofs outside the inspired word of God claiming that the word itself is inherently sufficient to prove the existence of God. Nature/creation and other evidences may be good in themselves and factual, although interpretation is tainted with sin affecting one's noetic views cannot lead anyone to faith despite the bare facts before their eyes. The Holy Spirit must transform someone to see and embrace the light. The world must bow to scripture and deductively draw their presuppositions on the premise of scripture. In other words, the school starts its apologetic on the assumption that God is and His word is true to the letter.
10. Rationalism teaches that one needs to reason and use their mind to argue the case for the divine. Akin to the evidential method, It uses all possible avenues to convince the mind of a person using reasonable experience arguments. This may include allegorical methods, stories, myth story etc. whose plot is

the scripture. Other avenues would be drama, films, threads of discussions etc. all calculated to engage the mind and in the process point them to scripture. CS Lewis and Norman Geisler excelled in this method.

11. Subjectivism holds that we experience and interpret the world with our senses and thus interpret it. We know what is true by our experience and a divine spark that reveals truth to us. In this school, we have the classic neo orthodox theologians such as Karl Barth who taught that scripture only became inspired once the Spirit impressed it on ones' mind and heart. At that moment, inspiration became true. This left room for one to believe and accept as true only what was impressed on their hearts, implying that not all parts of scripture were inspired at any one given time or in the same sense for that matter.
12. Each historical epoch has a major theological issue that challenges it and thus triggers serious definitions. In the first few centuries of the church for example, the Trinitarian and Christological controversies prevailed but today, the two major issues are Pneumatological and epistemological.
13. All major apologetic schools agree that absolute truth is found only in Jesus Christ, the wisdom of God. As such, one must have a living faith and relationship with him. Regeneration sorts out all these issues.
14. Presuppositions underlie all our choices, interpretations etc. in life.
15. Being unaware of one's convictions is not only dangerous but unwise. The earlier one sorts this out the better.
16. Each apologetical school claims to be superior to the others though none is full proof.
17. Some people claim that Jesus' resurrection was spiritual rather than physical. This is not tenable unless one is not a Biblist or denies the miraculous which the liberal theologians tend to support.
18. The second law of thermodynamics can be used to argue a point. If the universe were a closed system, it would eventually have all forces balanced out in the system because of Entropy had not God intervened. As the scriptures have rightly pointed out, the sun will burn out (2 Peter 3), a kind of heat death and eventually the end come about as scientific evidence increasingly suggest. If at all the Universe were uncreated and eternal, it would probably have reached entropy given the time lapse but this has not, proving the existence of God sustaining all things by his powerful hand.
19. One has to know that cultural pressures of every age increasingly generate criticisms to the Bible or God's law. Thus, what was once clearly wrong and

not debatable yesterday is today. Post modernism is the mother of all these and the Christian apologists must be adequately prepared for the work at hand.

20. The right Bibliology is foundational to theology. Miss it there and we veer into all sorts of heresies and errors. The reverse is equally true in many senses.
21. Over the years, Christian theology has shifted in its base, from a revelatory to subjective base. This has serious implications in all directions. One of them is the development of the 'the death of God' theological position, which in its essential nature is a blatant denial of scripture. From this movement comes what may be called the "Christian" atheists.
22. Faith is based on the will not emotions as argued by the evidential school.
23. Interestingly for the evidential school, any evidence arrived at variance with Christian claims is false and most likely not properly arrived at due to the effect of sin on one's noetic structure.
24. Christian evidences have several categories including: Material fact, Supernatural fact and experiential fact as asserted by Benard Ramm. The evidential school further claims that Theology can be treated as an empirical science in some sense.
25. With the advent of the 20th century, Theology shifted from being deductive to inductive by and large. This gave room for the proliferation of the evidential school.
26. Natural Theology plays a secondary role in Evidential Christian apologetics.
27. Some non-theistic skeptics have existed that include: Bertrand Russell, Julian Huxley (humanism), Franz Kafka (agnosticism) and Ang Rand (existential psychology) among others.
28. As earlier alluded to, the Christian faith does not merely rely on historical facts but neither can it do without them.
29. Rationalism and natural theology reject subjective experience as evidence for proofs.
30. Although archaeology cannot be used to prove the, authority of the Bible, it can none the less offers corroborative evidence and support to the reliability of the same. The numerous extant OT and NT discovered documents are helpful in that regard.

31. Some people argue against Biblical prophecy as proof because of the following alleged reasons: vagueness in the language, alleged misinterpretations, artificial fulfilment and prophecies written after the fact. All these arguments are weak and hollow compared to the remote probability of any of the prophecies ever taking place as stated.
32. On the other hand, some naturalists object to any miracles based on the following premises: miracles violate the laws of nature, they destroy the uniformity of nature, they introduce arbitrariness in nature, miracles are inconceivable in the modern context, they happened long ago with no extant witnesses and finally that human experience of miracles is very remote if not possible.
33. Others attempt to reject the fact of the resurrection based on the following premises: the disciples went to the wrong tomb, Jesus' resurrection was spiritual rather than physical, the exact location of the tomb is unknown, a look alike of Jesus was crucified in his stead, The body was stolen by his friends, some enemies could have stolen the body or simply Jesus did not actually die on the cross and later escaped.

Conclusion

Apologetics is a very important undertaking which every Christian must intelligently engage in. To be successful, there is need for one to appraise themselves with ever growing new facts for the sake of Christ. Our day's major issues border around epistemology unlike in the past and thus, a clear grasp of post modernism is essential.

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