Classical and Personalist Apologetics

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The author explores the relationship between two methods in apologetics through a survey of writers both classic and contemporary. The particular themes of God’s existence, revelation, and the relationship of Christianity to other religions are presented.

The “classical” method of apologetics begins by demonstrating the existence of God as the eternal, omnipotent, and omniscient creator of the universe. Although its modern version is associated with Descartes and others in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it hearkens back to the ontological and cosmological arguments of the scholastics in the Middle Ages, especially the Five Ways of St. Thomas Aquinas. This method also provides arguments to prove the resurrection and divine reality of Jesus and the truth of the church he founded. Contemporary writers such as Eleonore Stump, John E. Wippel, and Norman Kretzmann, among others, continue to study the Five Ways of the *Summa Theologica* and of the *Summa contra gentiles*. They clarify the language of scholastic philosophy and show in what way Aquinas’s proofs are still effective. Current versions of later classical apologetics abound, notably the works of Richard Swinburne and Brian Hebblethwaite. One might also include in this group those who write in the area of religion and science, such as Arthur Peacocke, John Polkinghorne, Paul Davies, John Haught, Kenneth R. Miller, and many more.

A “personalist” method of apologetics, on the other hand, emphasizes the importance of witness, testimony, and religious experience to provide the “best explanation” for accepting the faith offered through revelation by God. Its proponents

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are numerous and generally follow the line of Maurice Blondel, Henri de Lubac, Karl Rahner, Bernard Lonergan, Hans Küng, and others. Both the classical and personalist methods seek to carry out the mandate of 1 Peter 3:15: “Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence.” This essay explores the relationship between these two methods in current literature.

**Beginning with Religious Experience**

In his well-known *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (1987), Michael J. Buckley, S.J., laid out in great detail the apologetics of Descartes and Isaac Newton. He found their emphasis on purely philosophical reasoning on design and the laws of nature to be insufficient and actually leading to atheism. In its place he recommended an apologetics based on human experience and the reality of religion:

The commensurate evidence with which the divine existence is asserted or denied must include both the external presence of the saints of religious culture, or of Jesus, and the internal orientation of human beings toward the ultimate, the sacred, or the absolute. As the question is primarily religious, so the religious experience of human beings provides evidence that cannot be supplanted by something else. (361)

Buckley’s emphasis on the importance of beginning with religious experience in discussing the existence of God continues in his more recent work, *Denying and Disclosing God* (2004). Paul Tillich had claimed that unlike Augustine or later Bonaventure, for whom the presence of God was the object of inner experience and not of reasoning, Thomas Aquinas had approached God as a stranger by way of inference from other realities. Careful analysis of Aquinas’s technique in his answer to the question of whether the existence of God is self-evident shows that Aquinas too begins with an experience of God, however inchoate and indirect. Aquinas wrote:

To know in some general way and under a certain kind of confusion that God is, is naturally implanted in us, namely, in so far as God is the happiness of the human being. For the human being naturally desires happiness. And what is naturally desired by the human being is naturally known by him. But this is not to know simply that God is—just as to know that someone is coming is not to know Peter, although the one coming is Peter; for many think that the perfect good for the human being, which is happiness, is riches; others, indeed, think it is pleasure; still others think it is other things. (ST 1.2.1.ad 1; cited in Buckley 2004, 53).
The very experience of a desire for happiness is implicitly an experience of the desire for God, who alone can bring that desire to fulfillment. It starts out as a vague awareness of the connection between the desire for happiness and its completion, but in time the true nature of that desire becomes apparent, just as the vague presentiment that ‘someone is coming’ turns gradually into the realization that that someone is actually Peter.

The experience of the mystics, as described, for example, by St. John of the Cross, also helps to bring the issue of God’s presence/absence into focus. What is originally experienced is not God, but as one progresses through the dark nights of the senses and of the spirit, one eventually comes to know God as someone unfathomable but very real. “Gradually one is transformed by the self-communication of God, as this grace moves one through the intense experiences of darkness into union with the incomprehensible God” (Buckley 2004, 110–11).

Henri de Lubac had already come to that same conclusion. In a well-known article published in May 1930, “Apologetics and Theology,” de Lubac called for a closer relationship between the two disciplines. His major contribution, Surnaturel, focused on the “natural desire to see God” as a human reality that could be fulfilled only by divine grace. By stating that this desire is “in us” but not “of us,” de Lubac could say on the one hand that it is “the mystery of our divine destiny” yet maintains the gratuity of grace. In precise theological language he was returning to Augustine’s famous statement, “Thou hast made us for Thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in Thee” (Confessions 1.1), and to St. Thomas Aquinas’s teaching that union with God is our destiny, that our concrete human reality is open to it because we are created in God’s image: “The gratuitous vision of God is beyond human reach, yet in a certain sense it is in accordance with human nature since the person is capable of receiving it, being created in the image of God” (ST 3.9.2 and 3, cited in Sullivan, 11).

He was also taking up a line of argument developed at the end of the nineteenth century by Maurice Blondel, whose 1893 doctoral dissertation, L’Action, was a philosophical analysis of human activity as being implicitly open to the supernatural. An effective apologetics would call for practical action of a life lived according to one’s best insights as the most appropriate way to prepare for the gift of faith (Dulles 2005, 202–207).
From Karl Rahner we learn that within every human experience, which could be called categorical, there is present an orientation to “boundless mystery,” which may be termed transcendental experience, a very indirect but nevertheless real experience of God. It is attainable because of the unlimited extent of the human spirit in knowledge and freedom. This experience is a hidden one, and though real, it is not immediately apparent. As we reflect on our experiences of love, fidelity, or hope, for example, we may arrive at this awareness more easily. Rahner gives some striking examples—when we forgive or are good to someone, though we receive no reward for it; when we try to love God but experience only emptiness and God’s silence; when we are absolutely lonely and do not run away from it but treat it with ultimate hope; when we accept the fragmentary experience of love, beauty and joy, as the promise of their fullness (Rahner, 82–84).

Hans Küng’s massive volume, *Does God Exist? An Answer for Today* (1995), begins—like Buckley’s *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*—with Descartes and contrasts the various arguments for the existence of God since the seventeenth century with the different forms of atheism that were their ultimate response, including those of Feuerbach, Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche. His “Answer for Today” is in three parts: yes to reality, yes to God, yes to the Christian God. The reality we experience is uncertain and faces us with a choice: trust or mistrust. Küng supposes that if God exists, the reasons for a fundamental trust in reality, even though uncertain, are much stronger than otherwise.

**Classical Proofs of God’s Existence**

Though the classical “proofs” of God’s existence are not universally accepted as probative, they ask important questions. Is it reasonable to think that the universe exists because an infinite God has brought it somehow into existence? Is it reasonable to think that reality, especially the human mind, has a purpose, a goal given it by God? These are two questions that have plagued the renowned former atheist Antony Flew, as described in his recent book, *There Is a God: How the World’s Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind* (2007). He had generally denied the need for an “unmoved Mover” to explain the origin of the universe; why not simply consider the universe to be *eternal* and containing its “movement” within itself? As an atheist he had accepted the universe as “brute fact” without need for further explanation. It was only when he became convinced that the universe had an actual beginning with the Big Bang about 15 billion years ago that the issue of origins arose in his mind. In a chapter entitled “Did Something Come from Nothing?” Flew describes his dissatisfaction with various theories proposing that the universe came from “nothing” or from an infinite series of Big Bangs and Big Crunches and declares himself convinced that David Conway’s *The Rediscovery of Wisdom* (2000) and Richard Swinburne’s *The Existence of God*
Writers on science and religion have been using the cosmological argument persistently. Paul Davies in *The Mind of God* (1992) argues against the claim that the laws of physics began with the universe itself and concludes: “If that was so, then those laws cannot explain the origin of the universe, because the laws would not exist until the universe existed. . . . But with transcendent laws one has the beginnings of an explanation for why the universe is as it is” (92). Davies also uses the argument from contingency, why there is something rather than nothing: the only answer is *creatio ex nihilo*, “creation ‘from nothing’” (69).

Antony Flew had at one time adopted the possibility of life arising by chance and used the example of a group of monkeys typing randomly on a typewriter and eventually coming up with a Shakespearean sonnet. This theory was demolished by Gerald Schroeder, who showed that a normal sonnet had 14 lines or about 488 letters, and that in order to get the right sequence by chance one would need to multiply the number of letters in the alphabet, 26, by itself 488 times, or 26 to the 488th power, or $10^{690}$. He then noted that there are only $10^{80}$ particles (protons, electrons, neutrons) in the universe, so that it would be impossible to get the needed number of strokes by a factor of $10^{600}$ power. Just to write a sonnet by chance! Then what about writing a whole Shakespearean play? Or bringing about “the enormous complexity of the number of elements [in DNA] and the enormous subtlety of the ways they work together”? (75–78). Flew felt forced to conclude that “the origin of life pointed to the activity of a creative Intelligence” (74).

In spite of the success of classical apologetics such as that which moved atheist Antony Flew to accept the existence of an omnipotent and omnipresent spirit, Michael Buckley’s insistence on the importance of an experiential approach to God
may well be warranted. At the end of his book Antony Flew admitted that he had not yet arrived at acknowledging God as personal or open to some kind of relationship. That may be a next step, but it will not be the outcome of more ratiocination.

**The Existence of Divine Revelation**

The anthropic cosmological principle as worked out by J. D. Barrow and F. J. Tipler in their 1986 book of the same title considers the many extraordinarily precise initial conditions at the origin of the universe that were necessary, but actual, so that conscious human beings might exist some day, after billions of years of evolutionary development. Was this directly willed by a divine creator in order to enter into dialogue with the universe itself? It is not unreasonable to think so. Swinburne discusses this in detail, discounts the probability that multiverses exist and concludes that the existence of “bodies of conscious beings who have moral awareness” points to their creation by God (218).

**Encountering God in the Bible**

In terms of apologetics, the Bible serves as the primary locus of witness to faith in God. Both in the Hebrew Scriptures and New Testament the various narratives, poems, prayers, and other literary forms convey the experience of God of both the Jewish and Christian communities. These writings have been declared as expressing infallibly the truth of divine revelation.

In a 2004 symposium at Azusa Pacific University on the truth of the Bible, published as *But Is It All True? The Bible and the Question of Truth* (2006), many of the presenters emphasized the importance of the church or community in arriving at an adequate understanding of biblical truth. Stephen Davis of Claremont McKenna College cited as witnesses to the truth of the Bible the testimony of the church, the admirable properties of the Bible itself, and the inward guidance of the Holy Spirit, but also the “rule of faith” of the whole Christian community in dealing with new issues and not adhering slavishly to the practices of the past (102). Dennis Olson of Princeton noted that one arrives at the truth of God only after “long years of struggle, suffering, and transformation within the context of God’s chosen human community” (30), and Dale Bartlett of Yale pointed out that biblical truth is a person, Jesus, who is the way, truth, and life (John 14:6) and that our truth implies our own existential transformation. Vatican II’s *Dei Verbum* (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation) with its acceptance of historical-critical and other contemporary methods in studying the Bible and understanding its inerrant truth as consisting in “truth for the sake of our salvation” (11) has made the explanation of the reason for our hope so much more effective. Yes, the Bible is the word of God, but in human words.
The Hebrew Scriptures

The Hebrew Scriptures attest in manifold ways to the reality of God as one who creates the universe as “good” and humans as God’s “image and likeness,” called in freedom to an intimate relationship with him in obedience and love. In the story of Abraham we learn the importance of faith, in the Exodus we become aware of God’s continued will for liberation from oppression, and in the Sinai covenant we see God’s offer of righteousness through fidelity to divine law. Prophetic preaching emphasizes that even after sin and due punishment God continues to provide many opportunities for repentance and renewal. The psalms teach us how to pray, and the wisdom literature instructs us not only on the proper way to act, but also on the profound depths of human existence, and on the mystery of the relationship of the world around us to God. We learn at the same time the limits of human understanding and the need for divine revelation.

Jesus in the New Testament

In his 2004 McGinley Lecture, “The Rebirth of Apologetics,” Avery Dulles noted a revival of apologetics under Pope John Paul II especially in terms of personal testimony. “Human beings are made for transcendent truth, and such truth turns out to be a person who says of himself, ‘I am the truth’” (Dulles 2008, 436). Dulles proposed five rules for evaluating the biblical testimony: convergence, firmness, novelty, transformation, and illuminative power (438). The gospels present many theologies, but only one vision of Christ, and the evangelists write with authority and conviction. Their message about the preaching, healing, and salvific death and resurrection of Jesus as Messiah and Son of God was new and certainly difficult to integrate into their traditional Jewish monotheistic faith. But they were transformed by their contact with Jesus and willingly offered their lives in fidelity to him. Finally, the message itself was so enlightening: “It provides clues to the riddles of suffering and death, which no human philosophy could unravel. It gives hope to those who, humanly speaking, have nothing to hope for; it offers means of forgiveness to sinners plunged in a morass of guilt . . . and promotes a civilization of universal peace and love” (439). The approach to Christology starting from the effects of Jesus on his disciples and the early Christian community is exemplified in a number of recent books, such as The Disciples’ Jesus by Terrence W. Tilley (2008) and James D. G. Dunn’s Jesus Remembered (2003).

The Church’s Personalist Apologetics

Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O’Connor, archbishop emeritus of Westminster, recently spoke about the failure of secular humanism to reach its goal because of its inability to prevent the exploitation of others. In its place he recommends “a new apologetics of presence” as “a way of keeping open a space for what is good and truly human, for the Christian life when it is lived in its beauty, generosity
and depth, is a life that is good; it is a life which is fully human” (16). A vital church is a powerful attraction for those seeking religious truth and commitment.

Alister E. McGrath, in *The Order of Things: Explorations in Scientific Theology* (2006), sees the church as an appropriate starting point for a scientific theology. Since his method involves “iterative procedures,” returning to the same subject a number of times, he could begin anywhere, but feels that the most concrete place would be the church. “Church” includes a community, a narrative, and a “decision to orientate its life and action around scripture” (221). Scripture is the authority, whether directly or mediated by the community, for its worship, preaching, and spirituality. The community of faith bears witness to the “narrative of God . . . in the world” (222) and thus touches on all the phases of theology. It is an ideal place to begin an apologetic introduction to faith.

The marks of such a church include its founding by Christ, unity, universality, and holiness. Francis A. Sullivan, S.J., in *The Church We Believe In* (1988), points out that many Christian communities of both East and West accept the idea of the church as “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic,” but have different explanations of what is meant. His own study sees in Vatican II an ecumenical openness towards a broad understanding of these terms. Its decree on ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio* declares that the one church of Christ “subsists” in the Catholic Church (4), thus accepting various levels of theological unity, though not juridical, of the other Christian churches. The same is true of the holiness of the church, and of the other characteristics.

**Christianity and World Religions**

One of the paths of apologetic argument for the existence and revelation of God is the universality of religion. *Nostra Aetate* (Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions) of Vatican II stated that “the Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines, which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all people” (2). Theologians increasingly note that much can be learned from the world’s various religions and that they are indeed imbued with divine revelation and the Spirit of God. The declaration *Dominus Jesus* of the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (2000) pulled back considerably, but was widely criticized for it. Dialogue with non-Christian religions continues in at least four dimensions: a dialogue of life, getting to know one another with mutual respect; a dialogue of action, a common struggle for justice and economic progress especially for the poor and marginalized; a dialogue of theological exchange; and a dialogue of religious experience.

In *Quest for the Living God* (2007), Elizabeth Johnson notes that “the religions with their saving figures and sacred texts, their creeds, moral codes, rituals, may be seen to be channels of God’s word and grace set up by divine providence” (174).
The emphasis by Jesus on kenosis, on the reign of God free from oppression, and his role as divine Savior in a way that is “unique and singular, proper to him alone, exclusive, universal, and absolute,” as declared by Dominus Jesus, remains central to the Christian faith, but this understanding still leaves much room for the activity of God’s Spirit in the many religions of the world (175–77). Frederick E. Crowe, S.J., in Christ and History (2005), a study of Bernard Lonergan’s Christology, points out that love for God and neighbor is both necessary and sufficient for our eternal salvation. The reality of love is a gift of God, as is our ability to respond to that gift: “It follows that he gives all men [sic] the gift of his love, and so it further follows that there can be an element in all the religions of mankind that is at once profound and holy” (212). This would happen through the gift of the Holy Spirit and make adherents of all the world’s religions members of God’s family; instead of being “anonymous Christians” they might perhaps be thought of as “anonymous children in God’s family” (217, n. 30).

References


