

Apologetic Theology Today

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The discipline (science) of theology is divided into several fields. Instruction in the faith that focuses on Holy Scripture is called biblical theology; instruction concerned with doctrine is called dogmatic theology; and so forth. Instruction in the faith that confronts erroneous concepts or teachings, responds to heresies and distortions, or clarifies the nature and essence of the right faith is called apologetic theology.

The Christian Church has known apologetic theology since its very beginnings. From the apostolic age, especially in the second century, the Church found itself facing many challenges: prevailing religions, heresies and false teachings, moral deviations contrary to the Gospel, and even false accusations. This compelled the Church to clarify the true teaching, defend the Christian faith, and present it as it truly is. Moreover, Christianity's missionary nature required that the faith be explained in light of the religious and philosophical concepts of the time. This is what the Apostle Paul did when he "spoke to the Jews and the devout persons in the synagogue, and daily in the marketplace to those who happened to be there" (Acts 17:17). We recall, for example, how he addressed the people of Athens and even quoted their poets.

Many Christian thinkers played a major role in developing apologetic theology. Presenting the Christian faith to the world was one of the reasons for the writing of the New Testament itself. This also explains why there are four Gospels: each presents the Gospel to a particular audience, addressing them according to their culture. Matthew the Evangelist, writing for Christians of Jewish background, frequently cited the Old Testament to show its fulfillment in Jesus. Mark, addressing Christians in Rome, made no reference to the Old Testament, since they were unfamiliar with it, but focused instead on Christ's power and miracles more than on His teaching, in keeping with the Roman understanding of the relationship between divinity and power. The letters of the Apostle Paul are likewise filled with explanations as well as responses to questions and incorrect practices that arose in newly founded churches.

Very quickly, the world began to attack the new faith, distorting its image or misunderstanding it. At the same time, many who attempted to present and explain Christianity were unsuccessful, falling into heresies or being influenced by

prevailing philosophies. This made it necessary to refute false teachings and to preserve the Christian faith from heresy and error. For this reason, the first Apostolic Council was convened (Acts 15), addressing the question of whether converts from paganism were required first to observe the Mosaic Law. From that point on, councils became a tradition in the Church, and it was understood that the Church is conciliar (synodal), a term derived from the Greek meaning “to walk together.”

The need to strengthen the faith of Christians, to invite non-Christians to enter the faith, and to engage both prevailing philosophies and the accusations leveled against Christians and their worship played a major role in the flourishing of apologetic theology and engaging in dialogue with others.

Beginning in the second century, theologians who wrote in defense of the faith came to be known as the Apologists: among them, Justin the Philosopher (Martyr), Aristides, Quadratus, Athenagoras, and Origen. There has never been a time, after Christianity spread throughout the inhabited world, when such defenders were lacking. The Church has always needed to address the world in which it lives, to engage it in dialogue, and to strengthen believers in their faith.

Christians acted in accordance with the words of the Apostle Peter: “Always be ready to give a reasoned answer to anyone who asks you about the hope that is within you” (1 Peter 3:15). They did not hesitate, withdraw into themselves, or fear engaging others in dialogue. Nor did they fear studying the surrounding culture and acquiring the skills needed to use it in presenting the Christian faith, or even adapting it so that the faith might be expressed clearly and intelligibly to those to whom the Fathers of the Church proclaimed it.

Christian apologists drew upon the culture of their time, making use of history and its evidence, philosophy and its arguments, science and its theories, preaching, rhetoric, dialogue, and every means available to them. A well-known modern example of our own era is the work of C.S. Lewis in twentieth-century Britain.

As long as the Church exists, and as long as the world exists, apologetic theology will continue to exist. It is the Church’s responsibility to preserve the faith, proclaim it, strengthen believers in it, and engage both those who doubt it and those who oppose it.

In our present age, where borders have fallen and the world has become a single electronic village, challenges have become largely shared across the globe, though with varying intensity from one region to another. This has made it necessary for churches to exchange experiences, especially regarding contemporary challenges of faith and ethics.

Today, we observe, in many religions, a tendency to withdraw from engagement with the modern world and to limit faith to its practice and repetition, relying on an uncritical recycling of inherited legacies. Groups have emerged here and there that read the Church's tradition literally, outside its context, and reject dialogue with the sciences and other cultures. Meanwhile, the world moves on with or without us, and vast numbers of people, especially young people, need a presentation of the faith explained in their own language and cultural framework. This has always been available within the Church. It is precisely the approach taken by the Holy Fathers of the Church, whose teachings are today often distorted by some who claim to follow them.

There are unavoidable questions that must be asked. Why is there such fear of modernity that it leads to cutting off dialogue with those who think differently from us? Why do we unconsciously replace the principle of "Scripture alone" with "the Holy Fathers alone," and thus fall into a literalism that ignores the circumstances, motives, and needs that shaped specific teachings? Why do we act as though the Holy Spirit has ceased to work in the Church? Why do we not learn from the great Fathers of the Church how to understand the culture of our time, so that we may dialogue with it, defend our faith, and proclaim it using tools that help others grasp it as it truly is? Why, for example, was the Apostle Paul able to quote pagan poets in his sermon in Athens? Why did the Holy Fathers adapt the concept "of one essence" (homoousios) to serve the Christian faith, while many today reject contemporary theological readings despite their faithfulness to doctrine? And finally, why do some today present the faith only through aggressive comparison with others?

In an age of dialogue, why do we refuse dialogue? This is a question addressed to all believers.