

Apologetics.

Apologetics can be found in all monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) but in Catholic Christianity 'apologetics' is a theological discipline, a branch of scholarship which consists in proving one ought to believe, which is to say that it demonstrates the credibility of the Catholic faith. It can be distinguished from an 'apologia' (from the Greek), which is the defence of a particular argument or individual.

To define the precise field of the discipline it should be made clear that Catholicism is a religion established by God's intervention and communicated by God to humanity in a supernatural manner, through his messengers, the prophets. The revelation that began in the Old Testament was fulfilled and brought to completion with Jesus Christ and the twelve apostles. Jesus entrusted the entirety of divine revelation to a visible and hierarchical society based on faith, and indefectible, that is the Church, which he instituted as the guardian of revelation, with the task of interpreting it and teaching it to humanity for all time. Consequently, the Church provides the yardstick; and man should believe everything that the Church presents as being divine revelation. Belief in God is something that takes place in the soul: it is a meeting between God and man. There is no act or state more profound than this, because it connects man to the eternal foundations of his existence and his very salvation is at stake. Faith is a gift which comes from on high, and nobody can be compelled to believe. The object of faith is God, whom we are called to see face to face; it is the task of faith to lead us to blessedness. To this end, apologetics has recourse to natural morality, to historical testimonies, to biblical exegesis and to philosophical theology; each kind of research should be documented and verified with the intention of presenting reasons to believe or to provide confirmation of a choice which it is open to us to make freely. 'Faith and reason' – we read in the Encyclical *Fides et Ratio* of John Paul II – are like the two wings which enable the human spirit to raise itself to the contemplation of truth. It was God who put in the heart of man the desire to know the truth and, finally, to know God himself so that by knowing and loving God he may be able to attain to the full truth about himself.

The objectives and the methods of apologetics have frequently changed in the course of the centuries. In certain historical contexts the Catholic Church has focussed strictly and almost exclusively on its own identity – on its idea of its own structure, on its beliefs and on its practices – without giving so much attention to the task of evangelization. At other times the Church has been orientated outwards towards its mission in the world to such a degree as to risk losing its original mission, becoming assimilated to ideas and fashions that do not sit well with the Gospel itself. Thus the Church is tempted on the one hand by fideism and on the other by rationalism. The danger of one or other extreme is always present, and often the transition from adaptation to the cultural context to assimilation by it is all too easy. When Christian apologetics is at its best, it is alert to these opposite dangers and has sought to articulate a communication of that 'faith which was passed on to believers once and for all' (Jude, 1: 3) in such a way as to avoid both extremes.

The history of apologetics is the history of the various ways in which Christian thinkers, in different periods and cultures, have made the effort to 'explain the reason for the hope that is in them' (Cf. Peter 3: 15)/ The first apologists were intellectuals mainly concerned to obtain social tolerance for the Christian community: their aim was to prove that the Christians were not malefactors deserving of the death penalty. Vigorous defenders of the faith, they had not yet tried to develop a system for justifying it. In the controversy over the relative merits of paganism, Judaism and Christianity, the attack on Hellenistic religion was successful; also important was the assimilation of the best elements of Greek philosophy. Gradually, in the course of the first centuries, apologetics became less defensive, and a counter-offensive aiming to convert members of other groups took shape. Some focussed on the conversion of pagans, other on the conversion of Jews. In the Carolingian period the energies of the Western Church were taken up above all with the work of evangelization and of civilising the barbarians. But another assault was beginning, that of Islam, which, after the patristic controversy with christian heresies and with Judaism, required a new response. Between 600 and 1100, apologetics was a clash between the three great monotheistic faiths, each of which appealed to a historical revelation. One of the first to engage in the battle was John Damascene, who fought not only against iconoclast heresies, but also composed a *Dialogue between a Christian and a Saracen*. Meanwhile such figures as Alcuin, Rhabanus Maurus, Peter Damian and Peter the Venerable wrote against heretics, Jews and Moslems. For his part, Abelard composed a dialogue between a christian, a Jew and a pagan (one close to Islam). Furthermore, the strong link between Catholicism and cultural life led scholastic theologians, from St Anselm (1033-1109) on, to reflect on the connection between faith and reason. The converging approaches of Aquinas (1225-1274) and Bonaventure (1221-1274) remain to this day points of reference for theologians in the field of apologetics. Medieval apologetics reached its zenith in the thirteenth century, with the *Summa contra Gentiles* of Aquinas (1258/64; or 1270/72), a magisterial synthesis which followed on the failure of the Crusading movement and the penetration into the West of Arabic philosophy.

In the fifteenth century, with the fall of Constantinople (1453) and the unexpected love affair between humanists and pagan antiquity, christian apologetics began to move away from the scholastic paradigm. Transitional figures linking past with future generations were humanists like Nicholas of Cusa (1401-64) and Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), who, moving away from the excessive preoccupations of their predecessors with dogma, began to reflect on religion as a human phenomenon. The rejection by some thinkers of revelation, and the actual denial of God's existence by others, then stimulated orthodox Christians to demonstrate that revelation was actually possible. In doing this, they sometimes yielded too much ground to their adversaries, giving the impression that reason on its own entails a natural religion which could, from some points of view, take the place of Christianity itself. The early modern period, the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, was a period of transition. By contrast the nineteenth century was one of the most fertile in the history of apologetics, which succeeded in moving on from the sterile rationalism which had confined it in the previous century, and to draw new life from the history of religious experience. The philosophical

foundations of apologetics were enriched with new research in epistemology and the philosophy of religion. Standard Catholic theology, rejecting the critique of Kant, continued to insist on the demonstrability of the existence of God and the credibility of revelation. But thinkers like John Henry Newman (1801-1890) (beatified in 2010), relied on the experience of conscience and of human feelings of guilt rather than on the classic proofs. In the academic field, apologetics had to face the challenges of historical research and natural science. The theory of Darwinian evolution provoked a crisis; another crisis arose from biblical criticism; yet another came out of the new discipline of comparative religion.

In the first half of the twentieth century liberal protestants adopted an apologetic of compromise aimed at retaining the allegiance of Christians afflicted by doubts, while the Catholic world witnessed a return to scholasticism: this was the age of Ambroise Gardeil (1859-1931), Léonce de Grandmaison (1868-1927), and Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange (1877-1964). In the middle decades of the century theologians like Karl Barth (1866-1968) warned against an apologetic which played down faith as grace, and led to doctrinal compromises; while theologians like Henri de Lubac and Jean Leveillé criticised severely the neo-scholastic apologetic which Garrigou-Lagrange and Gardeil sought to revive in a modified form. At the same time, with Jacques Maritain (1882-1973) and Etienne Gilson (1884-1978), Thomistic philosophy became something akin to a form of apologetics. The path was not a smooth one. Some apologists, in their effort to reconcile the Church with the modern world, put forward audacious new hypotheses; while Catholic modernists found themselves rejected by the Church of their day. After Karl Barth, who had emphasised in the middle of the twentieth century that the believer could face the unbeliever without compromise or betrayal of faith, apologetics began to struggle for legitimation. Vatican II had however discouraged Catholics from entering into the controversy and argument which is implicit in apologetics, and the pluralism of contemporary thought made it harder to identify the adversary with which apologetics should engage. Given that apologetics is not necessary or even sufficient for saving acts of faith for some people, the boundaries and scope of apologetics were apparently being narrowed: to seek to show why it would be a reasonable thing to accept, with the help of grace, the word of God as it comes to us through scripture and the Church. This is the way in which in our times apologists have to face atheists, agnostics, and the indifferent. Finally, thinkers like Newman came to recognise that within every Christian there is a concealed unbeliever. Others, faced with the weakness of apologetics when it claims to be able to prove the fact of revelation with historical evidence, use the expression 'fundamental theology' to define apologetics. According to René Latourelle (1918-), fundamental theology, in its dogmatic aspect, studies the word of God as the fundamental reality of Christianity. Under this aspect, it elaborates the fundamental categories of theology as a discipline, such as revelation, tradition, biblical inspiration and the magisterium of the Church. In this initial phase, fundamental theology regards the response given by faith as a gift of grace, a free and decisive acceptance of the word of God. In its second aspect, apologetics, fundamental theology seeks to demonstrate that the word of God, as it has come to us in the course of history, deserves to be accepted by people who have not yet received it. It confronts the indications of revelation with the demands of and resistance offered by reason.

The task of christian apologists is to speak with a voice that carries conviction in a culture full of doubt and of the unbelief which is so dominant today, remembering to keep a warm heart and a cool head. In this way they should develop an apologetic of personal testimony, while at the same time they should a mastery of the proofs required to justify their position.

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Further Reading: Avery Dulles, *A History of Apologetics* (London, 1971)