CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS

AN INTRODUCTION

ALISTER E. McGRATH

WILEY Blackwell

Christian Apologetics

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For my colleagues and students at the Oxford Centre for Christian Apologetics
2004–2013

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How to Use this Book: To the Reader

This book, based on my lectures at the Oxford Centre for Christian Apologetics from 2004–2013, introduces apologetics – the field of Christian thought that focuses on how best to defend and explain the core themes of the Christian faith, and communicate these effectively and faithfully to the wider world. It assumes you, its reader, knows little about the subject, and aims to give you a good working knowledge of the field, and to encourage you to explore it further.

The Greek word *apologia* (which is traditionally translated as "defense") means something like a reasoned case proving the innocence of an accused person in court, or showing that a belief stands up to critical examination. We find this term used in 1 Peter 3:15, which many see as a classic New Testament statement of the importance of apologetics.

> In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer (Greek: *apologia*) to everyone who asks you to give the reason (Greek: *logos*) for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.

Yet from the earliest of times, Christian apologetics has been understood more broadly than a mere "defense" of the Christian faith. Many Christian writers thought of apologetics as the explanation, communication, and defense of the core themes of the Christian faith. While older works on apologetics sometimes depict apologetics in primarily argumentative ways, this work reflects the growing recognition that many earlier forms of Christian apologetics appealed to the human reason, imagination, and experience. It thus supplements the rational defense of faith by highlighting the positive appeal of Christianity to the imagination, emotions, and feelings. Francis Spufford's *Unapologetic* (2013) is remarkable on account of its explicit appeal to the emotional rationality of the Christian faith. Spufford shows how emotions that are "deeply ordinary and deeply recognizable to anybody who has ever made their way across the common ground of human experience" lie at the heart of the Christian life,

and are given new depth by its structures and practices. For Spufford, apologetics aims to help outsiders grasp what faith feels like from the inside. It's about allowing people to step inside the Christian faith, and experience the quality of life, thought, and experience that it enables.

Apologetics is both a *science* and an *art*. It involves both a solid understanding of the theory of the apologetics, linked to a wise application of this theory in practice. This is reflected in this textbook's consideration of the approaches of some leading practitioners in the field – such as Tim Keller – so that readers can both learn *about* them and learn *from* them, so that they can use them wisely. Although I have my own views on the nature and application of apologetics, this book is primarily concerned to help its readers understand, learn from, and use a range of apologetic approaches developed by leading figures in the field, past and present.

Every effort has been made to ensure that this book is accessible in its presentation, and reliable in its assessments. The book does not tell you what you should think, but rather explores the ideas of leading Christian apologists to help you develop your own thinking on this matter. I will tell you what I have found helpful, in the hope it will help you as well. If you are using this book for private study, you will find it best to read the material in the order in which it is presented. If you are using this book in conjunction with a taught course, you should follow the guidance of the course leader. Most chapters include two concluding sections entitled "Study Questions" (designed to help you check you have understood that chapter's contents) and "For Further Reading," which makes suggestions for works you might find helpful in taking your exploration of these themes further. While many significant studies of apologetic themes were written before 2000, there has been a significant change in momentum and direction of scholarship since then, so that most of the works referenced in these sections date from the twenty-first century. I hope to develop some video and audio resources to supplement this, and these will be freely available through the publisher's website.

Both the author and publisher will welcome feedback from readers of this work, which will help us develop future editions.

Alister E. McGrath
Oxford

How to Use this Book: To the Teacher

This book is based primarily on a series of introductory lectures I gave to student audiences when I was President of the Oxford Centre for Christian Apologetics from 2006 to 2013. The audiences for those original lectures were drawn from a wide variety of nationalities and denominations. These have been substantially rewritten in response to student feedback, and expanded in the light of later lectures I have given on these themes worldwide, particularly an extended course of lectures delivered at Regent College Vancouver in May 2021 (now available to you and your students on my YouTube channel).

The book aims to introduce core apologetic themes and approaches to your students in an accessible and reliable way, allowing you – the course leader or instructor – to supplement these with your own material wherever you feel this is appropriate, or to offer additional viewpoints or perspectives to enrich and expand those that are presented in this work. Apologetics is taught and practiced in a variety of denominational contexts and in the light of a range of informing theological assumptions. In writing this book, I have tried to avoid privileging my own context and assumptions, so that its material can be adapted for a range of Christian denominations and theological perspectives. Like C. S. Lewis before me, I have tried to work within a broad consensual Christian orthodox theological framework, which you can easily adapt and expand for use in Anglican, Baptist, Catholic, evangelical, Lutheran, Methodist, Pentecostal, and Reformed teaching contexts. Specific denominational emphases, exemplars and concerns can easily be grafted onto this generous and vigorous framework.

This textbook encourages you, the teacher, to weave in your own assessments, judgements, and add further material you feel is helpful or appropriate. It is intellectually *permissive* and pedagogically *hospitable*, in that it allows you to add additional material of your choice and adapt it to your own teaching context without in any way compromising its approach. This textbook lays the foundations of a course on apologetics, while encouraging you to build on those foundations in ways you find helpful and appropriate. The book provides you with a scaffolding that has been tried and tested over a period of two decades, to which you can add your own material. You can

easily draw on additional writers or preachers who you think connect well with a specific audience to the chapter dealing with "The Importance of the Audience," engage some additional or alternative questions in the chapter on "Responding to Questions," or expand the list of individuals I discuss in Chapter 9 entitled "Learning from the Wise." You can enrich my examples or quotations with ones that you think are more appropriate, or would work particularly well for your students.

The book does not endorse any particular school of apologetics, although it references some of these (particularly presuppositionalism), as well as influential individual writers. The work makes frequent reference to C. S. Lewis, who has emerged as one of the most widely respected and quoted figures within the field at both the popular and academic levels in the past 25 years. Many students now see Lewis as an inspiration for, and a gateway to, the study of apologetics, and this book builds on his accessibility and reputation without limiting its scope or focus. The book is designed to allow you to build your own approach on the foundation laid in this work, enriching it from your own experience and wisdom.

Although I have my own ideas about apologetics, they are not promoted in this work, which rather aims to set out the ideas and approaches of a wide range of representative apologists, to which you are encouraged to add others that you think may be appropriate and helpful. I have tried to introduce and explain these approaches so that readers of this work can decide how to develop their own. You can help with this process of interaction and critical assessment – for example, by weaving into your teaching your own insights, observations, and judgements. You are welcome to add yourself to the group of writers I engage with, which will both extend the range of the book, and help personalize it for the needs of your students.

Finally, I need to emphasize that apologetics is both a *science* and an *art*. This book provides some useful resources for learning about the theory of apologetics, and introduces a generous range of theorists and practitioners to help students develop their understanding of the foundations of apologetics. What this book cannot do is help students develop the *practice* of apologetics, so that they can master apologetics as an *art*. This is where you, the teacher or instructor, have a critically important role to play in helping your students develop good apologetic practice.

For example, one of the tasks I set my students at the Oxford Centre for Christian Apologetics around 2010 was to give a 10-minute talk on a specific apologetic question aimed at a specific audience (such as students). Most students found this helpful in developing their speaking skills and working out how to deal with a complex issue. You will be able to help your students develop the practice of apologetics by setting them practical exercises that will help them move from theory to practice – something that this textbook is sadly not able to do, precisely because mentoring is such an important aspect of the art of apologetics.

Yet despite its limitations, I hope you will find this book a helpful resource in your teaching, and that you will feel able to provide both me and the publisher with any feedback that may be helpful in preparing future editions. While you will want to develop your own teaching resources, the publisher and I intend to produce some accompanying video and audio material that you may find helpful. This will be uploaded to the publisher's website so that you can download it for your own use, free of charge.

Alister E. McGrath
Oxford

1
Introducing Apologetics

This book is a basic introduction to Christian apologetics aimed at students in colleges, seminaries, and church study groups, and those studying this fascinating subject independently. Some Christian apologists offer both defenses of Christianity in general, as well as of one its forms in particular. G. K. Chesterton, for example, defends a broad vision of Christianity, but in his later period offered a defense of Catholicism in particular. This book, however, focusses on *Christian* apologetics. It does not defend any specific form of Christianity, but rather what C. S. Lewis famously described as "mere Christianity" – a consensual vision of the Christian faith, focusing on its core themes and concerns.

Apologetics has a mixed reputation in both the church and the academy. Avery Dulles, one of Catholicism's most distinguished recent apologists, remarked that many people consider an apologist to be an "aggressive, opportunistic person who tries, by fair means or foul, to argue people into joining the church." The best way of countering this impression, Dulles argues, is to study apologetics "at its best," rather than looking at its weak and inadequate representatives and forms. This is the approach we will follow in this book, exploring and examining apologetics at its best down the ages, and asking what can be learned from it by focusing on some of its most significant and influential representatives.

Although apologetics is often understood in terms of developing arguments for the existence of God, it is really a much wider and richer undertaking. While affirming the truth and trustworthiness of the Christian faith, apologetics also aims to communicate the Christian vision of beauty, goodness and truth faithfully and vividly, so that people might grasp and be drawn to the richness and depth of its vision of reality. Truth may *convince* people, yet beauty *attracts* people. This process of explanation and

Christian Apologetics: An Introduction, First Edition. Alister E. McGrath.

commendation has become increasingly important as western culture gradually loses contact with the Christian narrative, so that it now often fails to understand its traditional vocabulary, or grasp its spiritual, moral, and existential vision.

As the next chapter in this book will make clear, apologetics has always been an important element of the Christian faith. Refusing to be confined to a Christian ghetto, early apologists considered it important to engage with their critics within the wider culture. Today's critic, they believed, might well turn out to be tomorrow's believer. They realized that, without engaging the wider world, Christianity might remain trapped in a kind of religious ghetto, being incapable of connecting with others beyond the church, or addressing their concerns about it. Recent developments in western culture show a growing disconnection between Christianity and a wider culture. The growing rise of religious "nones" in western culture, which dates from the turn of the millennium, suggests that one of the main reasons for this cultural disconnection with Christianity is a lack of understanding of how it connects up with real-life issues. Christianity is often understood as a rule-based way of life that demands nominal acceptance rather than a deep and transformative embrace. For many apologists, the best *defense* of Christianity is the faithful *explanation* of Christianity, linked with a personal testimony to its capacity to engage and transform human existence.

The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, noted for his careful analysis of the nature of secularism, persuasively argues that there is a need for apologetics to move away from a traditional "believers–nonbelievers paradigm" to a new "seekers–dwellers paradigm." This means apologists need to be able to think themselves into other people's ways of thinking. How might an outsider view Christianity? And how might this be sympathetically engaged? How might someone within the church who is struggling with some aspect of faith be helped to understand and embrace it? Part of the art of apologetics is to be able to explain and defend Christianity to an audience that is not familiar with its traditional vocabulary or its practices using terms and images that resonate with this audience. Apologetics is about building bridges from the community of faith to the wider culture, patiently and painstakingly explaining Christian ideas and showing – often by *embodying* them – how these can connect up with the lives and concerns of everyday people.

A second development is the more recent phenomenon of "deconstruction," in which older Christians, often with a long history of church attendance or association, conclude that their faith is no longer *meaningful* or *useful*. In his *Seven Types of Atheism*, the philosopher John Gray argues that atheism is best defined in terms of people feeling that they have "no use" for God. One of the key roles of apologetics is to show the difference that faith makes to life. Why is Christianity *useful*? This topic, among many others, is addressed in this work.

It is helpful to think of apologetics as both a *science* and an *art*. On the one hand, apologetics has a rich intellectual tradition and a distinguished group of practitioners, who are able to inform us about how best to engage questions and debates about faith. On the other, apologetics is a skill – an art that has to be learned through experience and reflection. There is an obvious parallel here with medicine. In healing people, a physician will draw on a rich body of technical medical knowledge, which is regularly updated and expanded; yet in the end, the physician is a practitioner of the art of medicine, which involves understanding patients, learning how to communicate with them,

understand their anxieties and fears, and journeying with them through the healing process. While the opening chapters of this work focus mainly on the theoretical aspects of apologetics, later chapters are increasingly concerned with the issue of how apologetics is best practiced, and engagement with its leading practitioners.

The Core Elements of Apologetics

Broadly speaking, there are three main elements to apologetics, set out later, each of which is engaged throughout the analysis provided in this book. Apologetics *engages* challenges to faith, showing that answers can be given to critical questions asked by outsiders; it *explains* what Christianity really is, and the difference it can make to human existence; and it *translates* Christianity's ideas and terms into everyday language.

Defense: Responding to Questions and Concerns

From the earlier times, apologetics has engaged with criticisms, objections, and concerns relating to Christianity from people outside the Christian community. Some of these arise from misunderstandings; early Christian apologists often found that one of the best defenses of Christianity was a simple explanation of its beliefs and practices. Others arise from intellectual difficulties some experience with the Christian faith, such as whether belief in God is consistent with the existence of evil and suffering, or whether the doctrine of the Trinity is fundamentally irrational.

Apologetics requires the cultivation of cultural empathy – in other words, learning about the cultural sensitivities and difficulties that many experience concerning the Christian faith. These may arise from historic issues, such as links between Christianity and colonialism during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, or from the dominance of certain cultural values that are seen to be inconsistent with Christianity.

Explanation: What Christianity is All About

A core theme of apologetics is affirming and communicating the attractiveness of the gospel – intellectually, relationally, and imaginatively. Apologetics is grounded in a deep understanding and appreciation of the Christian faith, particularly the difference that it makes to life. This is best done by communicating both the *substance* and the *outcomes* of faith. What do Christians believe? Why do they believe this? And what difference does this make to real life? How does Christianity enable people to find meaning in life? To cope with trauma, suffering, and uncertainty? The apologist needs to have both a good understanding of Christianity, and an ability to make connections with the "ultimate questions" that are so important to many in today's culture.

To draw on an image popularized by the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, the apologist is someone who "bridges horizons," thus enabling the core themes of the Christian faith to be brought into conversation with others outside the community of faith, in order to commend its vision of reality and the quality of life it enables. And, as we shall see, this means being able to translate the vocabulary of faith into the language of the wider culture in general, and specific audiences in particular (pp. 122–40).

This affirmation of the Christian faith can take two forms: *intrinsic* and *comparative*. The first sets out the apologetic virtues of Christianity – its capacity to make sense of things, its empowering vision of life, its grounding of a morally significant life, and so on. This may focus on the ability of Christianity to enable us to cope with suffering, or the transformed vision of the natural world and human nature that it makes possible. The second is more critical, in effect arguing that other worldviews, whether implicit or explicit, have internal contradictions or existential failings. Christianity is then argued to offer a *better* account of reality on these points. This second approach is developed in different ways by C. S. Lewis, Francis Schaeffer, and Tim Keller, and is particularly effective when dealing with audiences that believe their positions (such as secularism or materialism) are simply neutral, and are unaware of the many problematic assumptions embedded within them.

Translation: Unpacking the Language of Faith

The apologist Francis Schaeffer argued that apologetics has two main tasks: "The first is defense. The second is to communicate Christianity in a way that any given generation can understand." Schaeffer rightly notes that a core task of the apologist is to translate the language of the Christian faith into the cultural vernacular. Yet the philosopher and theologian Frederick G. Lawrence has pointed that some traditional ways of expressing the Christian gospel are now seen to be "alien and alienating," partly because of a loss of cultural familiarity with its themes and language.

In today's culture, social unfamiliarity is often equated with irrationality and irrelevance. To many in contemporary culture, the Christian faith seems to be jargon heavy, using a technical religious language that is disconnected from contemporary western culture. Central New Testament terms – such as justification, salvation, and sin – are increasingly likely to be dismissed as antiquated and irrelevant, or at best misunderstood. These terms often need to be translated or *transposed* – that is to say, reframed or re-presented in terms of accessible narratives or images, capable of connecting with a wider audience, while retaining maximum continuity with the Christian tradition. The vocabulary of the Christian faith needs to be unpacked, and re-presented in terms that its intended audiences can understand.

These, then, are the three core elements of apologetics. Each can be amplified considerably, as will be clear from the material presented in this book. Yet before beginning the study of apologetics in any detail, it is important to have a sense of the range of approaches that Christian apologist have developed down the ages.

Five Types of Apologetics

Christianity has developed a range of apologetic approaches and methods over the centuries, often in response to specific challenges and opportunities. While each of these has their own distinct emphasis, they are not incompatible, and are best seen as options that have universal apologetic potential, on their own or in combination with others. In what follows, we shall note five main approaches, to illustrate the range of

resources at the apologist's disposal in engaging questions and debates. This list can easily be expanded. While this textbook does not advocate any specific approach to apologetics, each of these is appreciatively referenced and engaged throughout its discussions.

Evidentialism

This approach appeals particularly to the rational and historical evidence supportive of faith, often focusing on the New Testament accounts of the life and ministry of Christ. This approach resonates with a scientific worldview that values inductive reasoning from evidence. It also allows the apologist to engage questions of biblical reliability – for example, in relation to the resurrection of Christ. A good example of this approach is found in John Warwick Montgomery's best-known book, *Faith Founded on Fact*. N. T. Wright's influential work *The Resurrection of the Son of God* can also be seen as a form of evidentialist apologetics.

Presuppositionalism

This form of apologetics is critical, pointing out how the way people reason and the assumptions that they consider to be "natural" or "obvious" are shaped by their underlying (and often unacknowledged) presuppositions. Writers such as Francis Schaeffer and Tim Keller both point out how there is no neutral or completely objective vantage point from which we see and interpret the world. This approach to apologetics thus aims to identify and criticize these presuppositions, and invite people to see the world through a different set of presuppositions – those of Christianity – and appreciate the new clarity and depth of vision that this brings.

Rational Apologetics

This approach aims to show that good arguments can be made for the truthfulness of Christianity, often using cosmological, teleological, moral, or ontological arguments. This form of apologetics became especially important in western culture as a result of the rise of the "Age of Reason," when it was seen to be important to give a rational defense of the Christian faith as a whole, or some of its individual aspects (such as the doctrine of the Trinity). Yet early Christian writers also used rational approaches in challenging the views of Greek philosophers, just as medieval Christian writers used them in meeting the rational criticisms of Christianity originating from Jewish and Islamic writers. They remain important today, despite the waning of rationalism in western culture, particularly in engaging contemporary Da'wah Muslim apologists.

Experiential Apologetics

This form of apologetics argues that Christianity offers a better way of making sense of human experience than its rivals. Augustine of Hippo, Blaise Pascal, and C. S. Lewis all argue that Christianity offers us a new way of understanding our experiences and what

these point to. Although this lacks the rigor of rational argument, it connects well with real-life experiences, and offers an important entry point for apologetics through the realm of shared human experience – such as an experience of longing for something of ultimate value, or the sense that this world is incomplete and inadequate for human fulfilment.

Narrative Apologetics

Since the Second World War, there has been growing interest in presenting Christianity as a "better story" that is able to give a better fit with the actualities of life than its secular and religious alternatives. This is seen by many as restoring a proper emphasis to Christianity as a story that is to be lived out, leading to a meaningful and fulfilled life, rather than a series of propositional statements that are to be proved and accepted.

This brief account of some important approaches to apologetics will give readers a sense of the rich range of options at their disposal, as they aim to develop their own approaches. They are not in competition with each other, or inconsistent with each other. They can all become part of a cumulative integrated understanding of apologetics, capable of engaging a wide range of audiences and questions.

Why Apologetics Matters – and How it Can go Wrong

Early Christian apologists were quite clear that they had a major role to play in defending and commending what was widely seen as a maverick new religion in the imperial Roman world. For a start, few outsiders knew very much about Christianity in the second and early third centuries, and rumors abounded about what this new movement believed and practiced. The early Christians were regularly accused of practicing cannibalism and incest during their assemblies. Why? These accusations are generally agreed to reflect cultural misunderstandings of the eucharistic practice of "eating the body of Christ" (which was confused with cannibalism) and early Christian references to a "love-feast (Greek: *agapē*)" (which was confused with an orgy). Early Christian apologists – such as Justin Martyr and Tertullian – responded to these attacks effectively and simply by clearly explaining what Christians actually did.

Yet as Christianity became a more significant presence in late classical antiquity, its critics shifted their attention from its *practices* to its *beliefs*. Christian ideas were subjected to increasing scrutiny, particularly by philosophers who raised questions about their intrinsic rationality. Apologetics now began to focus to clarifying the grounds of Christian belief, providing a defense of beliefs that were seen as problematic – for example, concerning the identity and significance of Christ. Early apologists realized that a failure to defend Christian beliefs would create the impression that these beliefs were indefensible.

The issue of public accountability thus came to play an important role in apologetics. Christian writers aimed to show their many within Judaism and imperial Roman

culture that Christianity had excellent rational credentials. As Austin Farrer points out, cultural acceptance often depends on recognition of rational acceptability.

> Though argument does not create conviction, the lack of it destroys belief. What seems to be proved may not be embraced; but what no one shows the ability to defend is quickly abandoned. Rational argument does not create belief, but it maintains a climate in which belief may flourish.

Farrer's point is significant: if you don't defend something that is being criticized, people will simply assume that it is indefensible. Apologetics may not always be well done; yet if it is *not* done, many will assume that it *cannot* be done.

It is helpful to return here to Charles Taylor's analysis of our "secular age," which he argues has led to the "fragilization" of belief. J. K. A. Smith helpfully explains this important idea as follows: "In the face of different options, where people who lead 'normal' lives do not share my faith (and perhaps believe something very different), my own faith commitment becomes fragile – put into question, dubitable." Taylor's point is that all beliefs – religious or otherwise – are now seen as "contestable," in that they are open to challenge and criticism. It is clear that many Christians find this uncomfortable and unsetting.

Two important points, however, need to be made. First, it is not simply *Christian* beliefs that are culturally "fragile." The same problem emerges with any religious, ethical, or political beliefs that lie beyond the worlds of mathematics and logic. And second, apologetics is not about *proving* that core Christian beliefs – such as the doctrine of the Trinity, or the existence of God – are true. Many shallow truths can certainly be proved; yet deeper truths about meaning, value, and purpose in life – whether these are Christian or secular – cannot be proved by science or reason. The rational norms of the "Age of Reason," assumed by some in the middle of the twentieth century to be the guiding principles of Christian apologetics, are now seen as being unrealistic aspirations. Apologetics can certainly give excellent reasons for the hope that lies within us (1 Peter 3:15), but many would now resist the suggestion that it can *prove* Christian beliefs to be true by unaided human reason.

The Canadian apologist and theologian John Stackhouse rightly reminds us of the limits of human reason, and its consequences for apologetics: "given historic Christian teachings regarding the finitude and fallenness of human beings and of our thinking in particular, we must be careful not to claim too much for what we believe." Apologetics can certainly show that there are good reasons for believing in God or other aspects of the Christian faith – but these cannot be *proved* in the strict sense of the term, as I might prove that "2 + 2 = 4," or that "the whole is greater than the part." Epistemological humility is in order here – the realization of the limits placed upon human reasoning by virtue of our sin and finitude.

Apologetics is not merely important in maintaining the plausibility of faith in a wider culture; it is an important aspect of personal faith development, in which individual Christians come to deepen their appreciation of their belief system by gaining a better understanding of (and confidence in) its core themes. Apologetics is part of the process of Christian discipleship, aimed at helping Christians achieve a deeper sense of the interconnectedness of faith, and the coherence of its various aspects.