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Apocalyptic Apologetics and the Witness of the Church

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Abstract: The discipline of apologetics has always been somewhat controversial in Christian theology. In the early church, the Greek-speaking apologists were often opposed for their attempts to express the gospel in the terms of Greek thought. In more recent times, the critiques of Soren Kierkegaard and Karl Barth, that it is an attempt to appeal to foundations that have nothing to do with the gospel, have cast a shadow over the discipline in recent years. This paper seeks to take those critiques seriously, yet argues that the discipline of apologetics is vital for the ongoing witness of the Church. It offers a new vision of apologetics based on the theological Apocalyptic genre. Rather than attempt to prove the existence of God or the truth of the Christian faith by rational means, Apologetics can be reconceived as an essentially narrative or descriptive discipline. The Apocalyptic genre thinks of the gospel as the result and announcement of the good news as a radical incursion of God into human life and history in the Incarnation and Resurrection. Apocalyptic Apologetics thus becomes an attempt to describe the world of history, politics, relationships and art (in fact, everything created) as lit up by the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. It becomes a wide-ranging and imaginative venture to redescribe the world in the light of the gospel. This approach re-establishes Apologetics as a crucial part of the Church's witness while avoiding the critique that it smuggles in assumptions and foundations from outside the gospel itself.

Keywords: apologetics; apocalyptic; Auden; witness; rationalist; evangelism; descriptive

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1. Introduction

The Centre for Cultural Witness is a new venture from within the Church of England seeking a renewal of the public understanding of the Christian faith. From its inception, it has coined the term 'Cultural Witness', which contains a number of potential meanings, including the task of witnessing in this particular cultural moment, engaging wider cultural norms and products and exploring the relationship between Christian faith and contemporary cultural life.

This essay begins to explore the particular approach to Cultural Witness that the Centre is adopting, seeking to move beyond more recent trends in apologetics towards a different form of cultural engagement of the Christian gospel with contemporary life and thought.

In Western Europe, the Church looks back on an age where it felt much more comfortable and secure in its place in culture. Christian leaders were honoured and distinguished members of society and were listened to with seriousness in public life, and the Church had an undoubted place at the centre of cultural life. Now, however, the Church feels much more marginal to social and political activity, and while traces of Christendom remain, and the deep roots of Western European culture are evident from time to time,[1] at least on the surface, the signs of Christian presence, especially in public discourse, are hard to find.

Responses to this in the Church in the West have been various. Sometimes, it is simply nostalgia for a lost past. More positively, a number of missiologically driven initiatives, such as Fresh Expressions; the Church Planting movement; and renewed attempts at evangelism in the UK and beyond through process courses such as Alpha, Pilgrim and Christianity Explored, have made significant but still modest gains in planting new churches and

attracting people to the Christian faith. However much of this seems to still be swimming against an increasing cultural tide flowing in the opposite direction to the Christian faith, towards the growing secularisation of life and culture.

On another level, there has been renewed engagement with the practice of Christian apologetics. This gained particular resonance with the rise of New Atheism, with well-publicised atheist voices producing polemical works attacking religion in general and Christian faith in particular, which have occasioned several rejoinders from within the Christian academic community. These new attempts at contemporary apologetics, however, have not been without their critics.[2]

Such a critique is not new. The theological discipline of apologetics has always been somewhat controversial. Even in the early years of the Church, the Greek-speaking thinkers that we know of as the early Christian Apologists, people such as Justin Martyr, Athenagoras, Clement of Alexandria and others, did not find universal delight among their contemporaries for their attempts to make the Gospel understandable to the Greek-speaking world. Figures such as Tatian and Tertullian poured scorn upon any attempt to translate the gospel into Greek terms and adopted a much more hostile stance towards pagan culture than these apologists who sought to adapt Greek terms and notions for the communication of Christian ideas.[3] For Tertullian and others, this attempt at synthesis was a step too far in betraying the radically different metaphysics that the gospel revealed. It felt like pressing the good news into the procrustean bed of Greek thought and, therefore, losing something essential, diminishing the distinctness of Christian faith and practice in the process.

During the years of Christendom, apologetics understandably took a backseat. Occasionally, Anselm's ontological argument, the synthesis of faith and reason in Aquinas and his 'Five Ways', have been gathered under the category of apologetics, although this always seems a little tendentious, as these are theological enterprises aimed at exploring the internal coherence of Christian faith rather than seeking to make an argument for faith outside the Christian Church.[4]

In the early stages of the rise of the Enlightenment, the desire to develop defences of orthodox Christian faith begin to re-emerge in the seventeenth century and beyond, in England with Joseph Butler's arguments with the Deists and William Paley's 'Natural Theology'. In France, a tradition of French apologetics developed, involving people such as Marin Mersenne, Yves de Paris and Jean de Silhon, engaging with sceptical leanings that can be traced back to Montaigne, as well as Protestant apologists such as Hugo Grotius and Philippe de Mornay (d'Angers 1954). Blaise Pascal, of course, is a prominent figure in this tradition, although his apologetic method differs from these others in significant ways.

In more recent centuries, apologetics has had its severe critics, in particular, Søren Kierkegaard and Karl Barth. For Kierkegaard, apologetics was equivalent to Judas' kiss, the 'treason of stupidity' (Kierkegaard 1980, p. 87). For him, the Christian message had a compelling force not because it was rationally more coherent than other messages but simply because it was a word from God, breaking into the superficiality of ordinary life. What prevents people from accessing it is not a lack of intelligence but nothing more than sin. Reason is always historically and culturally situated, and so an appeal to reason always ends up as an appeal to the crowd, judged at the bar of public opinion. Kierkegaard opposes any apologetic attempt to make a case for Christian faith because it grounds faith in secular reason and makes faith into something it was never intended to be, the kind of rational acknowledgement of the truth of Christian faith that does not make any particular demands on the existential life of the person, the kind of faith he subjected to withering critique in his analysis of Christendom.

In a similar fashion, the early Karl Barth in particular, with his classic and memorable refusal of Emil Brunner's dabbling in natural theology, rejected any natural point of contact between God and humanity that could be the basis upon which any apologetic attempt could be made: 'Anxiety concerning the victory of the Gospel—that is, Christian Apologetics—is meaningless, because the Gospel is the victory by which the world is

overcome. . . . It [the Gospel] does not require representatives with a sense of responsibility, for it is as responsible for those who proclaim it as it is for those to whom it is proclaimed' (Barth 1933, p. 35).

Apologetics for Barth, therefore, can never be a distinct discipline, and for him, the best apologetics is good and proper dogmatics, in other words, the Church's public confession of faith. Any attempt to demonstrate the existence of God through human reason will always end up as idolatry. The later Barth softens this critique a little, yet it remains true that Barth's critique of apologetics has been hugely influential and has cast a shadow over the discipline in Protestant circles at least over the past century or so.

In more recent decades, certainly in Western Europe and North America, as noted above, apologetics has been dominated by the rise of New Atheism. The emergence of, among others, the 'four horsemen' of New Atheism, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett and Christopher Hitchens (Dawkins 2007; Dawkins et al. 2019) led apologetics into a defence of Christian faith against such attacks led by theologians and apologists such as Alister McGrath, Ravi Zacharias, John Lennox, David Bentley Hart and William Lane Craig (McGrath 2004; Lennox 2009; Hart 2009; Craig 2008).

Given the scale and popularity of this very public attack on Christian faith, such responses were perhaps necessary for a time; however, arguably, this response is in danger of allowing the apologetics enterprise to become narrowed into engaging with this debate on the terms of New Atheism, presenting arguments for the existence of God, the historical veracity of the Resurrection and so on, in a way that renders them vulnerable to the critique of Kierkegaard and Barth, that they are effectively an attempt to commend the gospel in terms that have little to do with the gospel itself.[5] This has led to a number of critiques of the apologetic enterprise that continue the Barthian suspicion into more recent times.[6]

Catholic theologians have never felt quite the nervousness found in these Protestant circles to the task of apologetics. With their background in Thomist ideas of nature and grace and belief in the ongoing validity of divinely implanted reason in the human mind, they have always felt there was value in appealing to the natural capacity of rationality in the minds of those without faith.[7]

Yet, for many, the suspicion of rationalist apologetics remains. The enterprise of seeking to prove the truth of the Christian faith according to pure reason is, according to John Hughes, 'not so ancient as we might think, but actually belongs to this particular philosophical project, which we call modernity and the European Enlightenment, and more specifically to rationalist foundationalism' (Davison 2011, p. 5). And foundationalism is a problem if it proposes foundations for knowledge outside of the gospel itself.[8] The danger is that of proving a God who turns out to be the God of the Deists, or the God of the philosophers, as Pascal argued, rather than the God of Jesus Christ.

Can the discipline of apologetics survive the Kierkegaardian/Barthian critique? Is it essentially an attempt to ground the truth of Christianity in a logical framework that somehow exists above and beyond it? Does it fail to grasp the radical nature of the new metaphysics that the Christian faith brings into the world?

Perhaps a way forward can be charted through a look at a particular period of twentieth-century European life where a concerted attempt to give an account of Christian faith in public seems to have had a significant, if short-term, impact on public perceptions of Christian faith and even perhaps led to growth in church attendance and involvement.

2. A Christian Vision of the World: 1940s Britain

Alan Jacobs has told the story of how, as the dark days of the Second World War progressed in early 1940s Britain, a debate began as to how Europe could be rebuilt after the cataclysm that had swept across the continent through the 1930s, leading to the tragedy of the war itself. If the great tradition of European social and political life had been led into the horrific cul-de-sac of Nazism, leading to the widespread destruction of cities and populations, as well as an erosion of trust in political institutions and intellectual life, what

vision would have the power to rebuild life and society in Europe after the war was over (Jacobs 2018)?

A typical episode related to the poet W. H. Auden. He recounted a visit to the cinema in New York in November 1939, while living in a part of Manhattan largely populated by people of German descent. As the newsreel preceding the film depicted Poles being taken prisoner by the Wehrmacht, his fellow moviegoers started shouting 'kill them, kill them!'. The experience shook Auden to the core and made him begin to ask on what grounds such a despicable perspective could be deemed morally wrong. To cut a long story short, he came to believe that 'only an appeal to something eternal, absolute, and good—like the God of St Thomas . . . would permit one to answer the Nazis to justify one's choice of social democracy over fascism.' As quoted in (Jacobs 2018, p. 7).

Over these war years, a number of other Christian writers and intellectuals began to engage in this debate, not so much by writing lengthy theological tomes but through other means. While an English Professor at Oxford University, C.S. Lewis gave a series of radio broadcast talks between 1941 and 1944, which were eventually published as *Mere Christianity* in 1954. T.S. Eliot, after his bleak depiction of cultural fragmentation in *The Wasteland* of 1922, offered his newly Christian vision of reality in *The Four Quartets*, published between 1936 and 1942. Dorothy Sayers wrote and produced her play about the life of Jesus, *The Man Born to be King*, in 1941–2.[9] The Roman Catholic Evelyn Waugh published *Brideshead Revisited*, the theme of which he described as 'the operation of divine grace on a group of diverse but closely connected characters' (Waugh 2000, p. ix), in 1945. JRR Tolkien was working on his epic stories of Middle Earth with the publication of *The Hobbit* in 1937 and *The Lord of the Rings* between 1954 and 1955. At the same time, figures such as Jacques Maritain in France and William Temple in England, as Archbishop of Canterbury,[10] were helping articulate new political visions for the future of Europe, resulting in the welfare state in the UK and the Christian Democratic movement that gave birth to the European Union.

Jacobs goes on to point out how part of this broad Christian engagement with the culture of the time took place in a gathering of Christian intellectuals known as the Moot, brought together by J.H. Oldham and that met between 1938 and 1947 (Jacobs 2018, pp. 24–32). This was an attempt to articulate a Christian response to the war and to advocate the need for moral and spiritual renewal in the British education system, in part because Oldham felt that the Christian voice in England was either indistinct or silent. The group included T.S. Eliot; the theologians Paul Tillich and Alec Vidler; and the German sociologist Karl Mannheim. Reinhold Niebuhr attended on occasion, and C.S. Lewis was asked to write papers for the group to discuss.

This coalition was not always harmonious. C.S. Lewis, for example, always disliked T.S. Eliot's poetry (McGrath 2013, pp. 106–7) (the feeling was mutual)[11], and Auden was a fierce critic of Niebuhr's political vision for lacking a spiritual heart. Yet, despite personal animosities, what can be seen here was a concerted and, to a certain degree, coordinated attempt to find a Christian voice in public. These were, by and large, not theologians but novelists, poets, literary critics and politicians. Their output was largely narrative in form, ranging from Sayers' plays to Lewis's Narnia stories, all painting an imaginatively rich, intellectually rigorous and spiritually informed picture of the world, seen through Christian eyes.

An interesting coda to this story, a connection not made in Jacobs' telling, is that this renewed Christian engagement with the imagination, this many-faceted depiction of a broad Christian view of the world, arguably led to the growth of the church in subsequent years. Callum Brown describes how 'the late 1940s and 50s witnessed the greatest church growth that Britain had experienced since the mid nineteenth century' (Brown 2009, p. 170). This period saw growth in church membership, attendance at Sunday school, Anglican confirmations and baptisms in other denominations as well (Brown 2009, pp. 172–73).

While the figures are undoubted, accounting for this growth is a little harder. Of course, the British Billy Graham crusades took place in the early 1950s, yet growth had

begun long before then. These events arguably reaped the fruit of a more general cultural Christian movement rather than being the cause of it. The post-war years were marked with austerity and a social conservatism that may have helped foster a return to traditional faith, and yet a major part of this growth in church engagement may be traced back to this rich, imaginative portrayal of a Christian view of the world during the war years. These books, novels, plays and poetry made Christianity attractive, intriguing and believable again for generations who had become tired of hackneyed phrases and repetitive sermons.

What was at the heart of this intellectual and imaginative renewal of the Christian imagination? An answer to this vital question might be found by looking at one particular artistic and poetic product of this movement.

From 1941 to 1942, soon after his conversion, W.H. Auden wrote '*For the Time Being: a Christmas Oratorio*' which took the form of a verse drama, tracing the Christmas story in the Christian Year from Advent through to the flight to Egypt. Towards the beginning of the work, the Chorus sings:

> We who must die demand a miracle,
> how could the eternal do a temporal act,
> The infinite become a finite fact?
> Nothing can save us that is possible:
> We who must die demand a miracle

The plea is for a dramatic intervention from outside, a miracle that undoes death, the death that was so commonly reported in news from the continent during these war years. As the play progresses, with the birth of Jesus, the old man, Simeon, declares:

> By the event of this birth the true significance of all other events is defined . . .
>
> And by the existence of this Child, the proper value of all other existences is given, For of every other creature it can be said that it has extrinsic importance but of this Child it is the case that he is in no sense a symbol. Shortly after this declaration, the three wise men speak to Herod: God has been born, we have seen him ourselves. The world is saved. Nothing else matters. (Auden 1994, p. 393)

These statements, which summarise the narrative flow of the play, can perhaps be taken as emblematic of this general movement and its approach to what we might call (though they did not generally use the term) apologetics. In light of the desperate situation of humanity during these war years, nothing else but the dramatic intervention of God can suffice. Social and political progress, using the resources of human endeavour, will never be enough. Only the miracle of eternity becoming temporal will do. Humanity is so corrupt and entangled in destructiveness and deceit that it can only be saved by a radical intervention from God, the incursion of the divine into human affairs. And that miracle occurs not in a new political movement or the technocratic society but in the Incarnation. This event both sheds light on and gives significance to every other event because it is the key inbreaking of God into human history. It is, in fact, the central event of history, as it is the only one that is not a symbol of something else, but the one event towards which everything else points—the 'myth become fact', as C.S. Lewis put it.[12]

Rather than mounting arguments for the existence of God or evidence of the Resurrection or the historicity of the Bible, the various strands of this imaginative and literary movement were an attempt to re-imagine reality in the light of the decisive intervention of God in the Incarnation. If the Second World War had seemed a cataclysm, interrupting the normal state of affairs, the Incarnation was seen as something even more decisive, casting a new light on the world. This insight gave rise, in a literary sense, to new worlds that overlapped with ours and yet bristled with imaginative colour, such as Lewis's Narnia or Tolkien's Middle Earth. As Lewis once said in a talk about the novels of Charles Williams, one of the 'Inklings', the group of Christian academics who met to read, edit and critique each other's books in Oxford,

> 'He is writing that sort of book in which we begin by saying, let us suppose that this everyday world were at some one point invaded by the marvellous.'

In other words, this might be described as an apocalyptic approach to apologetics.

3. The Return of Apocalyptic

It is undoubtedly true that there has been a widespread resurgence of interest in the notion of the 'apocalyptic' as a tool for unlocking the meaning and context of the New Testament. Yet, in theological terms, the word is a potential minefield of confusing definitions. 'Apocalyptic' is, of course, a literary genre common in the Second Temple period out of which the NT emerged. At first glance, it refers to Biblical texts such as the book of Daniel or Revelation, or other extra-biblical texts such as 1 Enoch, 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch. Yet 'apocalyptic' also stands for a type of theology that could be found in other literary works beyond the more obvious texts belonging to that genre.

Numerous authors have explored the significance of the apocalyptic as a category of theological exploration; Albert Schweitzer was perhaps the grandfather of this movement, with his dramatic and racial re-reading of early Christianity as an essentially apocalyptic movement, expecting the imminent end of the world (Schweitzer 2000). Much of the modern interest in apocalyptic stems from the influence of the early Karl Barth, especially his epoch-making commentary on Romans (Barth 1933). Ernst Käsemann was a further key figure in this development, with his often-quoted statement that apocalyptic was 'the mother of all Christian theology' (Käsemann 1969, p. 102).

Perhaps the main scholar in more recent years who has built on these foundations is J. Louis Martyn, with his ground-breaking commentary on Galatians published in 1997 (Martyn 1997). Further contributions have been made more recently by Pauline scholars such as Leander Keck (Keck 1984), Alexandra Brown (Brown 1995), Beverley Gaventa (Gaventa 2013) and Douglas Campbell (Campbell 2009). The interest in apocalyptic is not confined to NT scholars, however, and a number of systematic theologians have explored the significance of the genre, including Douglas Harink and Philip Ziegler (Ziegler 2018).

Some have emphasised the element of revelation (after all, that is, of course, essentially what the word Ἀποκάλυψις means). Some (such as Martyn) stress military metaphors of God's invasion of the world, while others have emphasised the radical liberation that apocalyptic brings, and yet others (such as Philip Ziegler) emphasise the battle with the powers of darkness—the three-agent drama involving not just God and humanity but also the reality of evil personified in the figure of Satan.

There is a debate within the field of apocalyptic studies as to the relationship between apocalyptic and eschatology. Are they effectively coterminous? Or is eschatology intrinsic to apocalyptic? As Jamie Davies points out in his summary of apocalyptic thinking in Pauline studies, earlier understandings of apocalyptic, such as in Schweitzer and Käsemann, saw an imminent Parousia as essential to the genre, whereas, more recently, the work of Christopher Rowland has stimulated a shift away from the eschatological to the epistemological as essential to the category. Apocalyptic, in his understanding, is about revealed mysteries that were not accessible to the natural mind, rather than necessarily expecting an imminent end of the age (Davies 2022, pp. 79–81). While the apocalyptic genre once implied a fascination with the imminent end of the world as we know it, this approach focuses attention more on the apocalyptic as enabling a new way of seeing the world as it really is—a world into which God has become incarnate, in which Christ has died for the sins of the world, a world that has been radically changed by the Resurrection of Christ.

Another related debate concerns the relationship between wisdom and the apocalyptic in Paul's teaching. At times, they have been seen as opposing strands of interpretations of Pauline theology, the former seeing Paul as offering a new form of wisdom teaching, a better way of navigating the world as it is, and the latter a much more radical break with the wisdom of this age, suggesting that, in Christ, something much more significant has

shifted in the hinge of the ages. Scholars such as Grant Macaskill have found a way to integrate these in a kind of 'revealed wisdom' (Macaskill 2007).

Significant for our purposes here is this dimension of the epistemological crisis brought about by the interruption of the historical process due to the coming of Christ.

For example, Martyn points out that, in Paul's conversion, he was not gradually argued into faith by a careful process of reasoning, but that God literally revealed, or *apocalypse*, Christ to him. In Paul's theology, therefore, before Christ, humanity was trapped under the power of an evil age. In Christ, God has invaded that *aeon* to bring liberation, ensuring final victory one day. In the meantime, the battle against the forces of evil has to be fought and won. The old world literally died in Christ, and a new world has been born. A dramatic new age has come into being where the time of cosmic enslavement is now past. Human liberation does not grow out of the present evil age, nor is it something towards which we struggle through political action, but is an invasive movement into that age that took place in Christ. The decisive victory has been won at the cross, which has brought about this new age, and the sending of the Spirit enlists Christians as soldiers in a battle while living in hotly contested territory. The Pauline epistles, therefore, tell the story of 'God's invasive act into a space that has temporarily fallen out of God's hands' (Martyn 1997, p. 105).

Moreover, this invasion of the world in the coming of Christ has not only brought about a new world it has also brought about what Martyn calls an 'epistemological crisis', or

> 'a new way of knowing . . . Paul sees the crucifixion as apocalypse, as the divine, revealing invasion that changes not only the cosmos, but also one's way of perceiving it . . . The glad tiding of this Christ became for them not an object, but rather an occurrence, happening in their midst as though it were a powerful explosion that rearranged the whole of reality'. (Martyn 1997, p. 132)

Besides Martyn, other scholars in this field have explored the epistemological aspect of this apocalyptic turn in a number of ways. Alexandra Brown, for example, in her reading of 1 Corinthians, argues that, in the light of the cross of Christ, Paul now posits a new kind of wisdom—an 'apocalyptic wisdom' (Brown 1995, p. 51)—which is both revealed and concealed (1 Cor 2.7) in the cross of Christ, the sign of the power and the weakness of God (1 Cor 1.24). This 'word of the Cross' has the ability to transform the Christian's view of the world, offering a new way of knowing the world and a new way of living in that world. The cross marks the end of the old age and the beginning of the new, and the Corinthian Christians are taken to task for not having realised the radical break that has come about, still viewing the world in the old way (Ψυχικὸς) as opposed to the new way (πνευματικῶς). In a similar way, even N.T. Wright, not normally considered an advocate of the apocalyptic Paul, has written of an 'apocalyptic epistemology' (Wright 2013, p. 1310).

In this strand of apocalyptic scholarship, we find the idea emerging of revealed wisdom—a new way of looking at the world, brought about by the event of divine intervention in Christ. Alexandra Brown focuses on the cross as the nexus of this new wisdom, yet we might also extend this to the significance of the Resurrection. As Davies puts it, drawing on Barth's understanding of the importance of the Resurrection for epistemology, 'In Paul's apocalyptic thought, the Resurrection is . . . the reality from which one reasons; it effects the transformation of the knowing subject . . . and is the ground of a new way of knowing.' (p. 148).

Thus, in the work of J. Louis Martyn, Alexandra Brown, Grant Macaskill and Jamie Davies, we see emerging a strand of understanding of the apocalyptic that stresses a new way of understanding, knowing and interpreting the world. It leads to seeing the world with new eyes.

Now, none of these scholars extends this idea explicitly into the field of apologetics, but if we begin to think along these lines, we begin to find some creative possibilities and the opportunity for a renewed vision of the discipline. If the Incarnation, the cross and the Resurrection of Christ have marked the end of the old world and the beginning of the new, how, then, is that world to be described?

4. Apocalyptic Apologetics

Myron Penner offers a significant critique of contemporary rationalist apologetics, arguing that they no longer work in the post-Enlightenment world. He conceives of apologetics as exemplified by figures such as William Lane Craig as 'the Enlightenment project of attempting to establish rational foundations for Christian belief' (Penner 2013, p. 7). For him, such modern apologetics discounts intuition, tradition and other ways of knowing that were common in the premodern world and assumes that being a Christian means giving rational assent to specific propositions that can be grounded in an external logic. This might be the liberal attempt to adapt Christian doctrine to the modern world or the conservative attempt to show Christian belief as compatible with modern science. Both approaches, he feels, are conditioned by modernity.

He goes on to argue that in place of the rational justification of belief, a more personal and committed living of the faith is needed—truth as verified by life. We need not just apologists carrying arguments, but prophets who have encountered God and speak the word for the moment. This is a valuable perspective but perhaps does not go far enough. The New Testament does seem to assume that the Christian will be called to account and needs to give an *apologia* for his or her faith when asked (1 Peter 3.15). That seems to assume a verbal response, which, of course, is grounded in the living of Christian life, but is still verbal nonetheless. The question is about what form that verbal response takes.

Our venture into apocalyptic theology perhaps gives us an answer to this question. We saw the fruit of an apocalyptic form of Christian theology in the imaginative and intellectual renewal of the Christian imagination in the 1940s. At the heart of that movement was not the kind of hopeful liberal anticipation of slow human progress towards the Kingdom of God as was fashionable in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century theology but a new vision of the world seen in the light of the Incarnation and Resurrection.

We also saw glimmers of this in the interest in epistemology in a movement that understands St Paul in particular as an apocalyptic theologian.

This perhaps gives us a way to reconceive the task of apologetics, reimagining it not so much as rational discourse, with the goal of arguing opponents of the Christian faith into submission through appeal to logical reasoning, but as a predominantly descriptive discipline. It presents the Church with the task of describing a world into which God has intervened decisively in the Incarnation, death and Resurrection of Christ.

Apologetics then becomes the discipline of seeking to describe the world as lit up by the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4.4). What then do politics, law, architecture, music, housing—in other words, everything—look like in the light of his coming?

5. Apologetics as Witness

Walter Brueggemann, in a stimulating reappraisal of the ministry of evangelism, invites the Church to rethink the telling of the gospel as a work of reimagining (Brueggemann 1993). He argues that the Old Testament story revolves around three themes: the promise to the ancestors, the deliverance from slavery and the gift of the land. This story, especially as retold in the light of Christ, is one into which all peoples are invited so that it can become the defining story of our lives rather than the other stories that might try to define us. Evangelism is, therefore, the invitation to reimagine a life around promise, freedom and gift, and to re-frame our lives by this story. This means a conscious replacement and rejection of other stories that might tell us we are simply consumers, playing our part in the advance of the economy; victims of harm or damage by others; or perpetrators of sinful oppression. The task of the apologist, 'the teller of the evangel, has as his work the complete and radical redescription of all of reality' (Brueggemann 1993, p. 62).

In another work, Brueggemann suggests that the task of the preacher, as well as, we might add, the apologist, is to 'invite and empower and equip the community to re-imagine the world as though Yahweh were a key and decisive player' (Brueggemann 2000, p. 2). He reminds us that this is hard, courageous work, a theologically demanding task, and yet,

it must be done. He goes on to insist that the proper stance of a church in exile must be the same as the stance Israel took in its own exile, which is that of witness. In a world that no longer assumes the reality of God and construes the world without reference to God, he writes, 'my suggestion . . . is that the genre of testimony (as bid for assent) rather than proclamation (on an assumption of universal consensus) is how ancient Israel proceeded to claim truth in a like situation' (Brueggemann 2000, p. 39).

In other words, the task of the Church is not to win arguments but to bear witness. The success of the apologetic enterprise is to be measured not so much in the winning of debates, or the defeat of enemies in argument, but by the extent and imaginative power of faithful witness that the Church is able to bear to the remarkable dawning reality it has seen in the coming of Christ. That witness, of course, is born both verbally and in lives that are humanised into compassion and grace. A measure of effective and successful apologetics, then, is not so much the number of converts convinced but the imaginative richness of the portrait of the world that is painted as lit up by the glory of Christ. The heart of apocalyptic apologetics is the task of describing this new world, which has been dramatically brought about by the interruption of human history in the Incarnation, death and Resurrection of Christ. It is looking at this world with new eyes, brought about by the epistemological crisis that the divine action in Christ has brought about.

Of course, the richer the range of imaginative colour, the extent to which the church can describe an intellectually and spiritually satisfying vision of life, the more likely it is that jaded, tired secular people, hungry for spiritual reality, will be drawn to that picture, as happened to many in Britain in the late 1940s and early 1950s. As Alister McGrath puts it, 'Apologetics is not primarily about persuading people that a certain set of ideas is right, although the demonstration of the truth and trustworthiness of the Christian faith is clearly important. It is more about depicting its world of beauty, goodness and truth faithfully and vividly, so that people will be drawn by the richness and depth of its vision of things.'(McGrath 2019, p. 18).

This suggests that the task of apologetics, viewed in this apocalyptic fashion, is as much a work of the imagination as it is of reason. The best apologetics have always engaged with this imaginative work. Augustine's 'City of God', for example, can be seen as an extended work of Christian apologetics, showing the incapacity of paganism to offer a satisfying way of living and dying and showing the ability of the Christian faith to provide just that. It does so by looking at the world through a new set of lenses, the perspective of the unseen City of God that lives alongside the seen City of this World and yet is directed towards a different destination. Bunyan's 'Pilgrim's Progress' does something similar, retelling the story of a person's life with imaginative colour as a journey to the heavenly city rather than a random series of events.

6. Conclusions

The task of *Apologia* in the modern world is primarily a descriptive one. How can Christians reimagine, re-describe and enact a renewed vision of economics, relationships and politics or money, sex and power in the light of the Incarnation, death and Resurrection of Christ? This form of apologetics promises a more relationally positive form of persuasion. Rather than antagonistically facing the non-Christian, arguing them into submission, or being argued into submission themselves, it places the Christian alongside their non-Christian companion, with a gesture of pointing away to something new and remarkable, the light that we see in the face of Christ, and then to the world as lit up by that light around us.

This approach also escapes the Barthian and Kierkegaardian critique of being founded on a rationality that may or may not have anything to do with the gospel itself. It does not try to prove Christian faith within the metaphysics of a secular notion of reality but offers to re-describe the world based on the different metaphysics, a world, as it were, baptised into Christ.

This takes apologetics beyond a narrow set of questions focused on the existence of God and evidence for faith in which it perennially seems to be on the backfoot, responding to critiques made from outside. Instead, it is nothing less than reimagining and re-describing the whole of reality in the light of the gospel.

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Notes

1 See (Holland 2019) for a recent influential popular exposition of the deep Christian roots of Western culture,

2 See (Penner 2013) for a well-argued recent critique of the modern apologetics enterprise.

3 See (Grant 1988), chapters 13 and 14, for an account of Tatian's critique of Greek culture and thought.

4 (Dulles 1971) is the classic historical account of the discipline. See also (Forrest et al. 2020) for a useful recent survey of apologetics.

5 Having said that, a number of these more recent apologists have developed more nuanced and creative approaches to the discipline that can be said to escape the Barthian and Kierkegaardian critique, such as in (McGrath 2019; Hart 2013).

6 See, for example, Penner, End of Apologetics.

7 Dulles, Apologetics, is the classic Catholic account of the discipline, and the approach is exemplified in John Paul II's *Fides et Ratio*: https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.html (accessed on 9 February 2023).

8 See (Thiel 1994) for an extended discussion of foundationalism, in conversation with figures such as the post-liberal theology of Hans Frei and George Lindbeck.

9 An intriguing footnote to this is that Karl Barth conducted a correspondence with Dorothy Sayers in 1939, and even if he felt she leaned a little too far in the direction of semi-Pelagianism, he was still appreciative enough of her work to translate two of her essays on the Creed into German in 1959 after her death.

10 See (Spencer 2015) for an account of Temple's contribution to these developments.

11 It is said of Eliot that he 'did not like the Christianity of C.S. Lewis': (Gordon 1989, p. 217).

12 '*Myth Became Fact*' in (Lewis 1971, pp. 39–43).

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