How to speak of God? Toward a Postsecular Apologetics[1]

Abstract

Against most expectations religion has not vanished from Western culture. If anything, it exercises a greater fascination than ever before. Broadly, we might think of ourselves as occupying a new, 'postsecular' space between a renewed visibility of religion in public life, and a corresponding acknowledgement of the importance of religious values and actors; and persistent and widespread disillusion and scepticism towards religion, and objections to religion as a source of legitimate public discourse. In a world that is more sensitive than ever to religious belief and practice, yet often struggles to accommodate it into secular discourse, how do religious institutions justify their position in a contested and volatile public square? This article argues that the contemporary postsecular context requires a recovery of the ancient practices of Christian apologetics as a form of public, theological witness to the practical value of faith, articulated in both deed and word.

Keywords

Postsecular, practical theology, Christian apologetics

Faith in Crisis; or Faith in a Crisis?

According to the latest British Social Attitudes survey, published in September 2017, 53% of all adults regard themselves as having no religious affiliation – an increase from 48% in 2015. Almost three-quarters of 18-24 year olds say they have no religion. 3% of adults describe themselves as Anglican and 5% Roman Catholic (Nat Cen 2017). Such statistics indicate the drastic, and continuing, extent of religious decline right across Western Europe.

Newspaper headlines to accompany such figures might read, 'Faith in Crisis', although they might easily be accompanied by ones reading 'Faith *in a* Crisis'. Following the terrible fire at

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Grenfell Tower in Kensington in London in June 2017, criticism of the local council and statutory authorities was rife. As the local community rallied to organise relief and as people gathered to mourn the dead, one area of local civil society was prominent by its actions: the faith communities. Stories circulated that it was local Muslims returning from a local mosque who were amongst the first on the scene – by virtue of their observing Ramadan, they had been awake and up and about on the streets and spotted the fire. Muslim groups continued to contribute practical aid in the days following; and the local Anglican church, St Clement and St James, also provided a place of refuge for relief workers, charity volunteers and traumatised residents. Subsequently, the following Sunday, the church building became a focus of a community act of worship attended by the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan.

It's maybe not so much of a surprise to discover that religious people were so quick to become involved. People of faith are statistically more likely to volunteer in their communities; and, whether it's a matter of an accident of religious observance, or possessing physical capital such as church buildings, parish halls and community centres, here we saw the tremendous – and unparalleled – ability of religion to muster up what is called "social capital": the reserves of human resources, physical capital, local networks and a strong ethic of community service and altruism which, when tragedy strikes, can be mobilised and which "pay dividends" in terms of simple presence and solidarity with those in need (Baker 2012).

But perhaps what is surprising is how we are constantly told that religion is marginal; that it's part of the problem, not the solution; and that faith is so far removed from the realities of everyday living as to be irrelevant; or that mosques, churches and other faith communities can't welcome people on to their premises or offer hospitality without "proselytising" or

trying to convert them. And yet we know, too, that whilst religion can be a focus of solidarity, it is often a source of division and even hatred. Following the bomb attack at a pop concert in the Manchester Arena in May 2017, reported incidents of hate crime and Islamophobia increased across the UK. Weeks later, came the distressing incident of a van driven into those attending the Finsbury Park mosque in London; an act which may be classed as an act of terror or a hate crime and where people appear to have been targeted simply for their religious affiliation.

This overwhelming ambivalence and confusion over religion had already come to a head the previous summer 2016, in certain beach resorts in the south of France. It focused on the wearing of the so-called "burkini" by Muslim bathers. The burkini, from a conflation of burqa (or burkha) and bikini, denotes a form of swimwear for (mainly Muslim) women which is seen as conforming to certain religious standards of modesty. There was uproar when media images were circulated of police officers requiring women to remove their clothing, prompting legal and constitutional debates over whether it was permissible under French law to prohibit such beachwear. A key principle of the French Republic, namely *laïcité,* or the separation of Church and State, which forbids the wearing of explicit religious symbols in public, came up against a rival tenet, that of individual liberty and freedom of expression. Policy-makers found themselves struggling on how to adjudicate between these equal and opposite sensibilities: freedom *from* religion; or freedom *of* religion? (Diotallevi 2015; Wright 2016)

A world 'troubled' by religion

This unprecedented, unanticipated, agonistic co-existence of religion and secularism is sometimes termed the 'postsecular' (Barbieri 2014; Graham 2013; Habermas 2008; Keenan 2002). Whilst the postsecular aims to acknowledge the new visibility of religion in global politics and the consequent reappraisal of the assumptions of classic secularization theory, it also seeks to hold in tension these threads of religious resurgence with an appreciation of how far secularism remains a default position for much public debate, especially in Western-style liberal democracies. As a whole, society is nervous about those who 'do God' in public, since it is unused to thinking about whether it is right to (re)incorporate the vocabulary of faith into our common life; and yet, religion is an ever-present reality and often manifests itself in new, unfamiliar ways and spaces, local and global. Public life is more sensitive – if not necessarily well-informed – about newly-emergent signs of religious belief and practice in its midst, yet often struggles to accommodate it into any meaningful framework.

A climate of political debate that is both more sceptical and more pluralist, and yet in some respects is more receptive to the language of values, will require a more explicit level of self-justification on the part of religious actors. But how might Christians give an account of the theological well-springs of their commitments in ways that are accessible and comprehensible to an ever more fragmented and sceptical body politic? I suggest that this entails a retrieval of the practice of Christian apologetics, in terms of our being prepared to defend our core principles and convictions *in public*.

The Roman Catholic theologian Avery Dulles in his *History of Apologetics* has described the contemporary apologist as 'an aggressive, opportunistic person who tries, by fair means or foul, to argue people into joining the church' (Dulles 1971, xv). Yet that adversarial, often very abstract style of argumentation is, I would argue, a departure from much of Christian history, which regarded apologetics less as a fight to the death over Christian doctrine, so much as a demonstration in deed as well as word of how the practice of faith makes a difference. Rather than being an adversarial or confrontational process, then, I want to cast apologetics more in terms of an invitation to dialogue and a pursuit that is concerned less with the fortunes of the Church and more with the 'welfare of the city' (Jer 29.7). This apologetics of presence represents an invitation to dialogue and the rejuvenation of the vocabulary and praxis of public life, as a way of enriching our shared commitment to the common good.

Anatomy of the Postsecular

For most of the second half of the twentieth century, the gradual marginalization of religious belief and institutions and the privatization of religious belief and practice formed the mainstay of social scientific thinking about religion. The dynamics of secularization were of course the matter of debate, but broadly the consensus was that it wove together a number of threads: the gradual separation or differentiation of religious institutions (such as the Christian church in the West) from mainstream society – so for example, the removal of education, welfare, morality, even rites of passage from the hands of religious institutions into those of the State. Secondly, it described the process of declining participation and belief in religious practices and dogmas on an individual level; and thirdly, the general privatization of religion within the moral, cultural and intellectual life of any society.

But alongside these secularising trends, and where the twenty-first century situation confounds the sociological orthodoxy of the mid- to late twentieth century, is the unexpected and unprecedented re-emergence of religion onto the global political scene. One of the characteristics of the past thirty years has been the way in which religion has become newly visible and experienced as a global phenomenon of considerable political and cultural power -- for good and ill.

1. *New Visibility, Continuing Vitality*

From the last quarter of the twentieth century the world began to see the unexpected 're-enchantment' of global politics – something we can probably date from the Iranian revolution in 1979, the rise of the Moral Majority in the US in the 1980s, the emergence of Islamist movements in the Middle East, Africa and South Asia. Clearly, the destruction of the World Trade Center on September 11 2001 stands as an iconic and devastating moment in all this, as an explicitly-religiously motivated intervention in world affairs. So globally speaking, the rise of forms of Islamism, especially in the Middle East, East Asia and Africa, and of Hindu nationalism in India, represent examples of the ways in which religion, far from receding to the margins of our political consciousness, has now erupted with unprecedented force.

But even within the West, where institutional Christian (but not other religions) decline appears to confirm the basis of 20th century secularization theory, religion is reasserting its visibility within political discourse, as well as colonising new spaces and generating new alliances and social movements. Ironically, cuts in government funding since the economic

crisis of 2008-9 have furnished the churches with opportunities to 'push back against the pressures of secularization' (Kettell 2015, 69) by offering buildings, resources and volunteers as statutory facilities are withdrawn. Recent research for the Woolf Institute's "Trust in Crisis" project highlights the 'quiet yet remarkable' presence of faith-communities, often in seriously marginalised urban neighbourhoods, arguing that '… it is local communities and locally-based volunteer organisations which confront direct and immediate needs in times of crisis. They are more in tune with realities on the ground and are able to plug the gaps left by austerity.' (Bock and Everett 2017, 13)

2. *Long-Term Decline*

Yet whilst religion may be newly visible and somewhat disconcerting to Enlightenment ideals of a neutral public square, its resurgent forms are very different from anything resembling a return to Christendom such as existed in medieval and early modern Europe. The religious landscape is far more diverse and complex.

For a start, talk of resurgence must be tempered by unequivocal evidence of drastic decline in the institutional strength of organized Christianity in the West. I have already cited the latest British Social Attitudes survey, but this is just another staging-post in what the poet Matthew Arnold called the 'melancholy, long, withdrawing roar' of the tides of faith. According to the 2011 Census for England and Wales, Christianity is still the largest religion, claiming 33.2 million people (59.3 per cent of the population); but this still represents a decline from 71.7 per cent a decade earlier. Within the same period, the proportion of those reporting 'no

religion' has increased from 14.8 per cent to 25.1 per cent, which is around 14.1 million people (Pew Forum 2012).

3. Mutation

But 'faith' itself, even within a Christian context, cannot easily be mapped back onto the old churchgoing patterns of the 1950s. It is commonplace to hear people describe themselves as 'Spiritual but not Religious'. This is particularly amongst younger generations, and reflected in the statistics on their religious outlooks and affiliations (ComRes 2013; NatCen 2017; Pew Forum 2010).

And whilst people still record high levels of belief in some kind of supernatural or divine being; whilst they may pray regularly, much of the rest of their religious lives are far more heterodox (believing in lots of very diverse things) than orthodox. So '41% of us now believe in angels, 53% in an afterlife and 70% in a soul' (Woodhead 2014, 54), and belief in angels, or reincarnation will accompany interest in traditional forms of spirituality such as making pilgrimages and retreats or singing Christmas carols. (Spencer and Weldin 2012, 24-30)

4. Resistance and Antipathy

But perhaps the most serious finding of recent research, and one which is quite relevant to our concerns, is the conclusion that religion is viewed increasingly not as something innocuous or marginal, but, as Linda Woodhead has put it, 'a toxic brand' (2014). So the postsecular contains a mix of institutional decline and persistence of disaffiliated spirituality

along with widespread suspicion of religion. And whilst a lot of that probably only manifests itself at this instinctive distrust of organized, dogmatic faith, it is important to acknowledge the impact on public discourse of the continued popularity of a group of high-profile atheist and humanists who consistently voice objections to the very legitimacy of religion as a form of public discourse (DeLashmutt 2009; Hyman 2010). Such campaigners object to any religiously-motivated intervention in public life, such as policies around same-sex marriage, assisted dying, faith schools, and so on.

Never mind that new Atheism often conflates the increase in religious observance with a rise in religious violence; that it over-states the conflict between religion and science; it fails to see the enduring 'after-life' of religion in the popular imagination; that it overlooks the possibility of European exceptionalism and continues to propagate the superiority of the European Enlightenment. Despite these, the new Atheists' ability to articulate something of people's instinctive distrust of any form of external authority, including religion, and to place religion on the wrong side of progress, reason and human flourishing, shows that religion remains a source of discomfort and distrust for many. Yet amidst that, there is also tangible evidence for a greater complexity beyond a straightforward reversal of the secularization thesis or Peter Berger's (1999) terminology of 'desecularisation': more like an extended after-life of religious decline, tempered by the mutation, diversification and reinvention of many forms of religious practice.

So as far as many parts of the world are concerned, this new dispensation represents much less of a religious revival and much more a quest for new footholds within the public square that is itself more fragmented and disparate, more global, more diverse. It is a context in

which the contribution of religion to the well-being of communities is welcomed by some, with new agendas and increasing enthusiasm; but at the same time, the very legitimacy of faith to speak or contribute at all is contested as vigorously as ever.

Toward a 'Postsecular Apologetics'

In such a situation what may be needed is what has been termed 'an apologetics of presence' (Murphy-O'Connor 2013). Whilst the church struggles to make space in our culture today to be heard, this calls for a creative and proactive engagement with our culture. It requires us to acknowledge the reasons why people find religion alien and 'toxic' and to engage seriously with that. Out of that awareness that nothing can be taken for granted, that the world at large no longer feels at ease with religion and cannot understand when the churches speak of God, then we need to search for the points of engagement and dialogue, or 'rapprochement' all the more diligently. How is this to be done? What would it mean to engage with culture, to undertake – or reclaim – the practice of apologetics?

Apologetics refers to the tradition of Christian discourse that has endeavoured to offer a defence of the grounds of faith to a range of interlocutors. It might be defined as 'the attempt to defend a particular belief or system of beliefs against objections' (Beilby 2011, 11). In his *History of Apologetics*, Avery Dulles identifies three strands of Christian apologetics: '*Religious apologists*' who traditionally would engage with adherents of other religious or philosophical systems and debate the intellectual coherence of the Gospel. '*Internal apologists*' were more concerned to address doctrinal error or heresy within the Christian

community itself; and a third group, which Dulles terms '*Political apologists*' advanced defences of Christianity to the powers-that-be, often in the face of state persecution (Dulles 1971, xx).

In the New Testament, we have some notable examples. Beginning with the day of Pentecost (Acts 2) the disciples communicated the Good news through the medium of the cultural and philosophical world-views of their audiences. Acts of the Apostles records how on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2.14–36), Peter's address to the crowd was couched in a way that placed Jesus as Messiah, prophet of Israel and fulfilment of the Hebrew Scriptures.

In the story of the apostle Paul's early missionary work, the effectiveness of his preaching the Gospel rests on the adoption of the cultures and philosophical assumptions of his listeners. Paul's journey to Thessalonica (Acts 17.1–9) included a visit to a synagogue, where he presented Jesus as the fulfilment of the Jewish Scriptures and prophets, which appeared sufficient to generate a hostile reaction from his audience. When preaching at the Areopagus in Athens (Acts 17.16–34), Paul focuses less on the Hebrew scriptures and chooses instead to engage with the pagan philosophy of the crowd. He preaches the Gospel as the fulfilment of ancient, hitherto hidden, divine wisdom. But when on trial in Caesarea (Acts 24.1–8), and having to defend himself against the orator Tertullus, he does so by appealing to the Jewish Laws and the Prophets. He is then transferred to Jerusalem (25. 1-12) where he avails himself of his rights as a Roman citizen to be heard by Caesar's court. These principles establish important precedents: of beginning from the world-view of one's dialogue partner, with an ability to be almost 'bilingual' in terms of speaking about the Gospel but in terms accessible and comprehensible to one's audience.

1 Peter 3.15: Let your lives speak

A classic text of early Christian apologetics is the first letter of Peter, in which the main warrant of the Church's credibility (and that of the Gospel) is the proclamation in deed and word of Christ crucified.

> Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened. But in your hearts, set apart Christ as Lord. *Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.* But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. (1 Peter 3.13-17).

This is a text forged out of the collective experience of those who perceive themselves as suffering for their faith, which by all accounts was not uncommon amongst first and second century Christian communities. Commentators are unsure as to whether this was chiefly at the hands of the State or simply everyday hostility from those around them. The legal connotations of 'apologia' suggest that the 'account' the Christians are called to give would be in a court of law; but on the other hand, the imperative to respond to anyone and everyone who asks suggests that it may have been in response to more low-key hostility (Achtemeier 1996, 34-36).

This social and political climate called for a particular kind of resilience, which the writer argues rests in the example and inspiration of Christ himself. The community is advised to see no contradiction between whatever difficulties they experience in the present and the reward or vindication that is to come, since this mirrors the logic of Christ's suffering and death and the promise of his resurrection. This is the 'hope' that sustains them in their privation. They are encouraged to stand firm in the face of ill-treatment. In spite of their suffering, no real harm can befall the ones who live with integrity and who hold to their faith. Good deeds and upright behaviour are their warrant; and God himself will honour that.

By living distinctive and exemplary lives, refusing either to cave in to persecution or assimilate to ungodly values, Christians are identifying with Christ's redemptive suffering and pledging their hope in the ultimate victory of the Cross. And if to be a 'Christian' is considered a crime, then it is one that a Christian should uphold with pride – which might be seen as another small subversion of Imperial authority, since in a normal trial one pleads innocent to any charges; yet here, the church is instructed to confess freely to their faith in the name of Christ who also underwent trial and punishment. The praxis and witness of a community prepared to model its corporate life on the suffering of Jesus constitutes its own best apologetic.

Post-Biblical Apologetics

As Christianity itself expanded, so it encountered different alternative cultures; and it continued to attract attention, not all of it benign, from the Imperial authorities. So we see a

continuity of the threads identified by Avery Dulles, of religious, internal and political, or public apologists: addressing 'Jews, pagans, sceptics and Emperors' (Graham 2013).

However, whilst the Biblical and Classical paradigms seemed to involve a kind of performative witness in which the exemplary lifestyle represented the primary focus of an apologetic, and where the apologist sought to find shared terms of reference from which to conduct their argument, the focus within Twentieth century and twenty-first century apologetics has tended to be on forms of propositional belief which correspond with Christian doctrine. As James Beilby, a leading modern exponent explains, 'In some cases, apologetics appropriately and naturally leads to an offer for a person to commit her life to Christ' (Beilby 1983, 23), granting a person 'the intellectual permission to believe' (Craig 2010, 19), as preparation for what John Stackhouse calls 'crossing the line' (Stackhouse 2002, 78).

Historically, however, this flies in the face of most of the trajectory of Christian apologetics which saw dialogue with surrounding culture as a necessary engagement and not simply capitulation to secular understanding. Whereas early Christian apologetics saw theology not as primarily evidential or positivist but as something that informed a way of life and articulated a whole way of being, these modern apologists have adopted what Myron Penner calls 'a kind of *apologetic positivism* … according to which Christian beliefs must be demonstrably rational to be accepted.' (2013, 44) In the best tradition of positivist science, truth is 'correspondence between reality and our words by means of propositions' (2013, 32). Penner continues, 'Issues such as the epistemological authority of Scripture, the intellectual coherence of theism or miracles, the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus … take center stage in modern discussions of Christian faith.' (2013, 33)

In its pursuit of logical argument and evidentialist proofs, this strand of modern apologetics has arguably become decontextualized, disregards the rootedness of Christian belief in historic communities of practice or discourse and simply appeals to the mind of the private individual. It is rooted in the Enlightenment paradigm of the autonomous, universal self whose capacity to discern truth is precisely dependent on their independence from external impediments or obligations -- tradition, autobiography, or emotion.

Behind such a model of apologetics is a particular view of salvation as being called out of a hostile and degenerate world. This spills over into a language, conscious or unconscious, of adversarial combat. So for example, in the face of prevailing cultural challenges, Christians will need 'upgraded apologetic weaponry' (Milbank 2011, xiii); Kreeft and Tacelli talk about 'the battle of arguments' (2003, 10; 139); and William Lane Craig predicts, 'we've got to train our kids for war' (2008, 20). No wonder John Stackhouse decries this in terms of 'apologetics as martial arts' (Stackhouse 2002, ix).

Such dualism of Christ and culture also fails to see apologetics as premised on any kind of common ground – or 'bridge-building' as Alistair McGrath puts it – on which Christians and non-Christians might engage in meaningful exchange. As I've suggested, this neglect of any kind of "cultural apologetics"—meaningful engagement with the broader community via shared reference-points and common debate (Budziszewski 2006) represents a departure from the classical apologists' objective of making their message comprehensible to others. However, as John Stackhouse argues,

Christianity … is much more than a set of propositions to which one might or might not grant intellectual assent. It is, at its heart, a path of life, a following of Jesus Christ as disciples and as members of the worldwide Church. If apologetics consists entirely of words and truths, therefore, it will literally fail to communicate Christianity, but instead, literally distort it by shrinking it to what words and truths can portray. (Stackhouse 2002, 131)

This is not to say that defending and commending the faith should not be carried out as an essential part of Christian witness. However, Christians today need an entirely different paradigm for their apologetics, appropriate to a postsecular age. As I have been spelling out already, our contemporary age seems to carry particular challenges, in which religion is both a clear and present reality in the world and yet proves troublesome and alien to many people.

Speaking of God-in-the-World, to the World

What kind of postsecular apologetics might be fit for purpose? I want to reclaim an understanding of apologetics as not so much a matter of rational argument, so much as being able to explain and witness to the wider canvass of an entire lifestyle and to narrate and make transparent and accessible an entire world-view. One way of doing this is to take a more narrative or autobiographical approach. In his book *Unapologetic*, Francis Spufford offers just such an extended model of what a contemporary apologetics might look like. The book's title reflects Spufford's rejection of the predominant paradigm of apologetics as propositional proofs, opting rather for a deeply personal narrative of what it feels like to inhabit a faith in a

culture where religion is deeply suspect. His core question is simple: What does it feel like to feel yourself forgiven?

You'd be hard-pressed to find a typical conversion story here. This is more about a day to day struggle with the improbabilities of belief in the existence of God, alongside that a determination to live as-if God did exist, as if forgiveness were a reality, and as if the world could be mended. He concedes that to a world convinced by scientific argument and hard evidence, it is hard to be convinced by any other way of knowing, any other kind of criteria for what is 'true'. But for him, faith is not about empirical knowledge but about the reality of lived experience:

> The point is that from outside, belief looks like a set of ideas about the nature of the universe for which a truth-claim is being made, a set of propositions that you sign up to; and when actual believers don't talk about their belief in this way, it looks like slipperiness, like a maddening evasion of the issue. If I say that, from inside, it makes much more sense to talk about belief as a characteristic set of feelings, or even as a habit, you will conclude that I am trying to wriggle out, or just possibly that I am not even interested in whether the crap I talk is true…
>
> But it is still a mistake to suppose that it is assent to the propositions that makes you a believer. It is the feelings that are primary. I assent to the ideas because I have the feelings; I don't have the feelings because I've assented to the ideas. (Spufford 2012, 18)

For Spufford, faith is about a struggle to live truthfully and authentically rather than possessing definitive truths and absolute certainties. Apologetics is not so much a matter of rational argument, so much as being able to explain and witness to the wider canvass of an entire lifestyle and to narrate and make transparent and accessible an entire world-view. As John Stackhouse puts it, 'The fundamental problem of religious allegiance … is not about what we think, but what or whom we love' (Stackhouse 2002, 113).

In response to the signs of the postsecular times, apologetics must also operate in the public domain, in the best traditions of consciously creating and curating pluralist and hospitable spaces in which different, even contending, visions of the common good can be debated. But it needs to be sensitive in the face of evidence that our culture is sceptical about the shortcomings of organized religion. Yet I think this is happening in many of the arenas in which faith-communities find themselves working together in local neighbourhoods, out of a common concern to respond to crises, as *Trust in Crisis* also noted (Bock and Everett 2017).

This has been explored further by Justin Beaumont and Paul Cloke, who call this 'postsecular rapprochement'. Amidst the plurality of faith groups and other agencies engaged in various forms of community partnership, especially in the city, they are discovering extraordinary 'interconnections between religious, humanist and secularist positionalities in the dynamic geographies of the city' (Beaumont and Cloke 2012, 32). Such collaborations are embodied in local initiatives such as food banks, youth training centres, mental health projects and asylum campaigns that demand a collective political and ethical response. It is out of such engaged and pragmatic dialogue, rooted in the performative praxis of faith, that postsecular apologetics is engendered, as the collaborative relationships built around common causes

deepen into discussions about the well-springs of participants' values and motivations. This represents a bringing together of the "what" of religious social capital, meaning 'the concrete and tangible actions and resources that faith groups contribute to civil society' with the 'why' of beliefs and values, or 'that area of belief or faith that actually energises or motivates our ethical and public living' (Baker and Miles-Watson 2010, 18-19).

Such a witness to faith-in-action must step beyond the parameters of its own tradition and engage in conversations with non-Christian (religious and secular) world-views in order to demonstrate how and why Christian sources and norms are capable of shaping viable responses to the common challenges facing us all in global civil society today. The apologist must test their claims against competing and complementary frameworks; but having done so, they complete their task by contributing to the shaping not just of lives of believers but the common welfare of all humanity. So the purpose of such apologetic conversation is not to impose a particular set of dogmas or orthodoxies but to nurture constructive alliances around shared moral tasks, and invite deeper exploration of the convictions that nurture such praxis. It models an apologetics of presence and partnership that refuses to 'bracket out' questions of faith and belief, on the basis that civil society is strengthened, and not compromised, by the virtues and practices of religion.

So the exhortation to 'give an account of oneself' finds expression in in terms of articulating the motivations behind the practices of social activism and neighbourliness. There is still a task to be done for Christian apologetics to 'show that it can form, inform and sustain the moral and spiritual architecture of a civil society so that truth, justice and mercy are more nearly approximated in the souls of persons and in the institutions of the common life.'

(Stackhouse 2007, 107) Theologically, this actually roots Christian apologetics in mission; and specifically, it takes its cue from contemporary theologies of the *missio Dei*, which understands mission as less a matter of personal salvation or institutional church growth, so much as a participation with the triune God in the task of redeeming the whole of creation as a work of reconciliation (Bosch 2011). We might frame this as a triple response. It comprises first an act of discernment and theological reflection, in terms of trying to attend to what God is doing in the world, and where. It stresses God's prior initiative and action in effecting the work of reconcilation and redemption, and practical discernment of those signs as a kind of 'double listening' to tradition and context. This is the prelude to the next stage, which is the task of participation in that mission: a vocation of discipleship and activism. This is why, I think, the practical demonstration of love in action is such a fundamental grounding of the practice of apologetics. But finally, the third task is to match those deeds with words: in terms of bearing witness to God at work in ways both prior to and beyond the conventionally ecclesial or religious. So this three-fold work of discernment – of the signs of the times, of our calling to respond, and to announce and commend the work of God, is always a public theology – an apologetics which bears witness to God-in-the-world, *to* the world (Graham 2013; 2017).

Conclusion

This new apologetics for a postsecular age entails cultivating a reflexive, self-aware understanding of what it means to be a person of faith in a world in which that is deeply counter-cultural (and often suspect); and of being prepared to 'give an account of the hope we have' (1 Peter 3.15). But this rests, as I have been arguing, on a willingness to enter more deeply into the sources and norms of one's own tradition, in the belief that dialogue with the other necessarily brings deeper self-understanding as well. It will be in response to introduce

the language of faith The 'hope that is within us' looks forward in anticipation to the possibilities of a greater wisdom and more expansive vision born out of the dialogue; and apologetics must necessarily be rooted in these process of dialogue and engagement. This is, in Christian terms, a deeply incarnational undertaking: a theology in practice.

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