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“TRADITIONAL APOLOGETICS IN A POSTCONCILIAR CHURCH: FROM
SCHOLASTICISM TO COMBINATIONALISM AND BEYOND”

A Dissertation

Submitted to the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Glenn B. Siniscalchi

May 2013

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SCHOLASTICISM TO COMBINATIONALISM AND BEYOND

By

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ABSTRACT

TRADITIONAL APOLOGETICS IN A POSTCONCILIAR CHURCH: FROM SCHOLASTICISM TO COMBINATIONALISM AND BEYOND

By

Glenn B. Siniscalchi

May 2013

George S. Worgul, Jr., S.T.D., PhD, Dissertation Director

Recognizing that Christians cannot adequately understand the mysteries of faith from a single vantage point, Catholic theologians have been keen on emphasizing the multidimensional nature of theological understanding since Vatican II. The advantage of such a method has helped believers to understand the rich, in-depth quality of Catholic faith.

One of the fields of theology which has not been discussed in the models approach, however, is apologetics—which includes as one of its aspects the art and science of defending the doctrines and practices of the Catholic Church. When all of the relevant passages in the documents of Vatican II are taken into consideration, a unique apologetical approach emerges that incorporates key advances as they emerged historically from the Church’s apologists. Each of the individual apologetic systems

from the past will be shown to have its own particular strengths and weaknesses. By way of contrast, I will argue that the best way to “make a defense for” the Gospel in a postconciliar church is to advance the integrated model of the Council. This integrated model of Catholic defense is called combinationalism. The interests and views of the apologists are proven to be complementary rather than competing.

This integrated model helps apologists and evangelists to recognize that although one approach might be needed in a certain context, it would be an egregious mistake to take that one system and use it as the exclusive means to reach persons situated within different circumstances and cultural contexts. This essay will not only exploit the different apologetic models in the post-Vatican II period, it will also serve as a serious work of apologetics in its own right by focusing on certain challenges as test cases to highlight the pertinence and liveliness of each model.

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INTRODUCTION

Today apologetics has a questionable reputation among Catholic scholars. So strong is this suspicion within the Church that even outsiders begin to question whether “arguments for faith” are constitutive of what it means to be a Christian. Because Christianity is a matter of faith, they say, apologetics must be taken as a curious example of modern day fundamentalism.

It is not difficult to see how the anti-apologetical mindset plays itself out in a myriad of ways. Cheap slogans such as: “Only the Holy Spirit can draw unbelievers to faith, not arguments!” are well known in many Christian circles. Other half-truths, such as “Lead by example and not words!” are often taken in a way that undercuts the apologetic mandate (1 Pet. 3:15). What enthusiastic Catholic has not felt awkward in the company of lukewarm believers (let alone in the presence of unbelievers), knowing that our culture has relegated religious expression to Sunday worship alone? And even when Catholics go to Church, who has not seen the lack of reverence in outward gestures that are supposed to be indicative of what is going on in the heart?

Yet another problem for apologetics is that of postmodern relativism (see chapter 2 of this dissertation). The issue of perspectivalism sometimes leaves the apologist reeling—hesitant to swish a spiritual sword in the dialogue with a potential convert lest she loses a friend or even family member “to the other side of the fence.”

And if all this was not enough, theologians and apologists must face the problem of relevance (see chapter 4 of this dissertation). For, apologetics is often seen by Catholics as something for intellectuals, not the ordinary person in the pew who wants something that applies directly to their life. Before we embark on the relevance of

apologetics for the greater purposes of developing this dissertation, it would be profitable for us to reintroduce some of the reasons for *anyone* to engage in apologetics.

First, Scripture commands that Christians do apologetics. In Jude 3, Christians are told to “contend for the faith.” In Colossians 4:5, 6, Paul warns the Church: “Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you know how you should respond to each one.” Paul saw his own role as that of an apologist. In Phillipians 1:16, he wrote, “I am here for the defense of the Gospel.” “Consequently,” says Walter Kasper, “faith, as understood in the Bible, is not a blind venture, not an irrational feeling, not an uncalculated option and certainly not a *sacrificium intellectus* (sacrifice of the intellect). Rather, faith can and must give a rational account of itself.”¹ 1 Peter 3:15 says we are to always be ready to give a reason for our hope. Notice that the passage says that believers are to *always* be ready to give a reason for faith, not just *sometimes*.

Second, the Magisterium urges theologians to do apologetics (see chapter 1 of this dissertation). In *Fides et ratio*, John Paul II reiterated the traditional teaching of the Church:

Recalling the teaching of Saint Paul (cf. Rom. 1:19-20), the First Vatican Council pointed to the existence of truths which are naturally, and thus philosophically, knowable; and an acceptance of God’s Revelation necessarily presupposes knowledge of these truths. In studying Revelation and its credibility, as well as the corresponding act of faith, fundamental theology should show how, in the light of the knowledge conferred by faith, there emerge certain truths which reason, from its own independent enquiry, already provides. Revelation endows these truths with their fullest meaning, directing them towards the richness of the revealed mystery in which they find their ultimate purpose. Consider, for example, the natural knowledge of God, the possibility of distinguishing divine Revelation from other phenomena or the recognition of its credibility, the capacity of human language to speak in a true and meaningful way even of things which transcend all human experience. From all these truths, the mind is led to acknowledge the existence

¹ Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell, (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1984), 67.

of a truly propaedeutic path to faith, one that can lead to the acceptance of Revelation without in any way compromising the principles and autonomy of the mind itself.²

“Theological science,” says Pope Benedict XVI, “responds to the invitation of truth as it seeks to understand the faith. It thereby aids the People of God in fulfilling the Apostle’s command (cf. 1 Pet 3:15) to give an accounting for their hope to those who ask it.”³ An apologetical mind is one that coincides with a heart for Christ. Hiding the truth is not a sign of love, but of fear. If intellectually engaged Christians truly believe that Jesus is Lord, then they will express their faith in every way that is humanly possible, not just in ways that exclude the mind and verbal persuasion. *Arguments* can and must be given for faith. However, being *argumentative* is an abuse of apologetics and should always be avoided in every circumstance.

Arguments, moreover, are not exclusively directed to unbelievers, but are designed to motivate believers within the context of the faith community.⁴ Indeed, apologetics is needed for believers to become confident about what they believe in order to explain and defend their faith.

Third, common sense suggests that apologetics is needed. God created human beings with the ability to reason. God therefore expects us to use reason. It also helps people to determine what is true, and how to justify one’s beliefs. Without reason, there is no justification for holding to any one set of certain beliefs over and against another set of beliefs. Socrates once said that “the unexamined life is not worth living.” The same goes for Christian faith: the unexamined faith is not worth believing. Since God did not

² John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, N. 67.

³ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian*, (May 24, 1990): N. 6. Cf. 1, 5, 7, 10.

⁴ John C. Polkinghorne, *Theology in the Context of Science* (New Haven: Yale University, 2010), 123-149.

create anyone without a mind, it is normal for all people to have questions and even objections to the truth.

Fourth, apologetics helps to inculturate the Gospel. Christians must be able to understand the wider cultural context where they live in order for evangelization to take place. The intellectual zeitgeist of West can be traced back to the secular philosophies of the Enlightenment. The hallmark of this movement was to free humanity from the “shackles of organized religion” (especially Catholic Christianity). The impact of this movement is still felt in the academy today. The upshot of these philosophies is that faith is equivalent to an opinion or personal taste; only that which is observable is worthy of public discussion and debate.

Kasper elaborates on the cultural malaise, offering a solution in the process: “Especially in a situation like ours today, when everything depends on the Christian faith making the transition to new cultural horizons and a new epoch, there can be no question of the Christian retreating into the realm of private experience. Today, as hardly ever before in the history of Christianity it is essential that the Christian faith emphasize its reasonableness which is accessible to all human beings.”⁵ If the very concept of truth has come under fire in our culture, then it only makes sense to explain and defend the very *fact* of truth before one can explain *what* is true.

Fifth, the results of apologetics confirm the apologetic effort. Sometimes Christians and unbelievers complain that apologetics never accompanies conversions to Christ. But this is a serious misreading of Christian history. After trying to debunk the historicity of Jesus’ resurrection, for instance, Frank Morrison became a Catholic after recognizing the historical evidence for the resurrection (for more on evidential

⁵ Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, 71.

approaches to apologetics, see chapter 4).⁶ C.S. Lewis came to believe in Christ under the influence of apologetics. In fact, Lewis was convinced that many of the people that he knew in England at the time who believed in God did so because of arguments for God's existence (thus chapter 3): "nearly everyone I know who has embraced Christianity in adult life has been influenced by what seemed to him to be at least a probable argument for Theism."⁷ Augustine embraced Catholicism after hearing a thoughtful Catholic debate with a Manichean.⁸ Although many more examples could be given, the point is that the Christian defense has accompanied conversions in the past.

When believers engage in the apologetic task, it creates an atmosphere that makes the Christian faith reasonable for outsiders to believe in (or at least judge it to be reasonable). So the question is not whether there are reasons for faith, but what kind of reasons we have. No one believes in anything unless they know that it is first believable. This would not mean everyone is able to articulate those reasons, but those reasons certainly do exist.

No matter what the circumstances, Christians must never make it their goal to win arguments with their dialogue partner. The apologist must develop the skill of making the Christian faith attractive, being respectful to their dialogue partner in the process. *Ideas* need to be presented and challenged, *not persons* as such.⁹ One of the most basic components of apologetic work is to love and care for our partners. This would not mean that Christians should refuse to make hard truth claims. Rather, the focus in the postconciliar period must remain on *how* our defense is made. As John Paul II argued in

⁶ Frank Morison, *Who Moved the Stone?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987).

⁷ C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays in Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 173.

⁸ See Augustine's *The Confessions*.

⁹ *Gaudium et Spes*, 28, 92.

Redemptoris Missio, the Church always proposes, she never imposes anything on anyone.¹⁰

True, apologetics can make people feel uncomfortable. But perhaps this stems from apprehending the truth of Christ in the discussion.¹¹ Let us remember the words of John's Gospel (3:19-21): "And this is the verdict, that the light came into the world, but people preferred darkness to light, because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come toward the light, so that his works might not be exposed. But whoever lives the truth comes to the light, so that his works may be clearly seen as done in God."

Whether it is the past or the future, the message of the cross and resurrection will always be countercultural, demanding a radical change of lifestyle. And this encounter will be uncomfortable to face at times. As Dulles explains, in defense of apologetics: "If they [accusations made against the validity of apologetics] come from a mentality that . . . shrinks from any kind of confrontation, the criticisms should probably be discounted. Apologetics has to be somewhat controversial; it should be forthrightly defend the settled teaching of the Church."¹² Not only should we always be ready to give a reason for our hope, we should also be ready for rejection, if not persecution.

Lastly, a blind faith can lead to self-destruction. Alternatively, a reasoned faith can lead to sanctity. Atheist Richard Dawkins once noted that faith "leads people to believe in whatever it is so strongly that in extreme cases they are prepared to kill and die for it without the need for further justification."¹³ Dawkins is partially correct: blind faith

¹⁰ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, N. 39.

¹¹ Avery Dulles, "The Rebirth of Apologetics," *First Things*, No. 143, (May 2004): 19, 20.

¹² *Ibid.*, 20.

¹³ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 2^d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University, 2006), 198.

can lead one down the path of violence (see the second half of chapter 6). But a healthy faith will seek to understand the object in which their faith is placed. Indeed, healthy faith does not forget to reason. When Christians limit the intellectual engagement of faith, it can literally steer them down the path of extreme forms of violence. Faith that is based on experience and subjective religious experience at the expense of reason leads one to embrace heresy. At other times it leads one to be violent against others. Reason reinforces faith and makes it come alive (see chapter 3); fideism ruins the very impetus for faith itself. Apologetics and practice are on two different sides of the same coin. Thus there should be different ways in which this relationship works itself out. Let us now turn to some of these reasons.

Apologetics and Practice

Apologetics can enhance believers' awareness and confidence to proclaim Christ. Because the truth element of theology tends to be overlooked nowadays, it is more important than ever to focus on the *truth* of Catholic faith.¹⁴ Indeed, the Church is the very *place of truth*. In this respect apologetics safeguards believers from becoming indifferent about discipleship. As Avery Dulles puts it: "If we do not consider that it is important for others to hear the Christian proclamation, we inevitably begin to question its importance for ourselves."¹⁵

¹⁴ For a theological and philosophical definition and defense of Catholic truth, see Ignace de la Potterie, "Truth," in *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, ed. René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella (New York: Crossroad, 2000), 1133. He writes: "In tradition, in addition to the use of the notion of truth derived from Greek philosophy [i.e., truth as correspondence], we find in some of the fathers and in the liturgy a resumption and development of the biblical conception of truth, but sometimes with a stronger emphasis on its doctrinal aspect. Generally speaking, truth designates the Christian faith, i.e., the divine revelation as it has been handed down in the church." I speak about "truth" at length in this dissertation in chapter 3.

¹⁵ Avery Dulles, "The Rebirth of Apologetics," *First Things*, No. 143, (May 2004): 20.

Apologetics plays an important role in facilitating the process of conversion—one of the primary tasks of the Church community. Authentic discipleship begins with authentic conversion. One of the values of engaging in the apologetic task is that it deepens and enriches an understanding of the truth. Since authentic parish unity is impossible to achieve without interior conversion, apologetics helps to facilitate the process of the Church becoming dynamic, evangelical, and one. As Christians become more and more confident that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, they inevitably become who they were meant to be, together in Christ

A ministry that neglects apologetics can destroy the driving impetus underlying missions. If dialogue is understood in the erroneous sense that faith in Jesus is unnecessary or unimportant, and that Christians only have to dialogue to understand one another for mere mutual enrichment, then the missionary mandate loses its underlying rationale. But evangelization is essential to the Church's life. As John Paul II writes, "In the Church's history, missionary drive has always been a sign of vitality, just as its lessening is a sign of a crisis of faith."¹⁶ Part of the reason for this lessening is due to a reductive understanding of ministry that forgets the importance of apologetics. A Catholic Church is not just inclusive, it is *expansive*. Conversely, if the Church is not expansive, then one must seriously question whether the Church is fulfilling its mission.

Apologetics is needed for theologians to understand the inner-rationale of beliefs or viewpoints that are different or even contrary from the Church's doctrines. The evangelical endeavor (one of the main purposes of the Church) demands that Christians familiarize themselves with different viewpoints. Repressing disagreement is not healthy for authentic faith, and certainly not with full Catholic faith. In recognizing differences

¹⁶ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, N. 2.

one makes the first step to understand the problems that need to be addressed for reunification and/or evangelization to take place. Although the full reunification of Christendom is a complicated endeavor, the apologetic enterprise enables Catholics to apprehend and appreciate the credibility of beliefs and practices that are different or contrary.

Apologetics is actually a form of compassion expressed by believers. In this sense apologetics must be incorporated into theology and the ministry. Disagreements within the Church (and other Christian communities and religions) do not have to be completely incompatible for pastors and theologians to become more apologetical in scope. It only requires that believers at least think that their beliefs are apparently different from other viewpoints. The apologetic element to dialogue will help to reveal whether these differences are real or only apparent. The same theme works in reverse. If I hold to beliefs that are wrong or misguided, then I certainly would want other persons to point out where I might have gone wrong. Good apologetic arguments, which are favorable to views that are contrary from my own, can help me to see my own theological errors.

It is strange that apologetics would be so lowly esteemed in so many Christian circles. Apologetics is needed more now than ever. The New Testament writers and early Church Fathers had to be heavily apologetical, for there was no Christian influence in culture yet. In a post-Christian context, it seems reasonable that we should have the same approach. An apologetical outlook might make greater inroads into the wider world. If we understand what apologetics is in its most basic sense (the positive and/or negative defense of the Gospel in both theoretical and practical forms), then obviously

apologetics is relevant at any time. Even though our culture and theology continues to change, Christians still live in an era where people need to be convinced that Jesus is Lord. Obviously this entails that Christians will have to make a defense of the Gospel. Again, there will *always* be objections to the Gospel, whether they are sub-consciously or openly stated by outsiders and those within the Church. And this is precisely the reason why apologetics will always remain a significant part of theology and ministry.

Even though there is real warfare going on between the Reign of God and the powers of this world (see Eph. 6:10-20), the believer's interaction with other believers and the outside world should be more diplomatic than combative. Although Christianity is already philosophically well positioned to deal with most objections, the more tactical concern of the apologist has to do with the engagement. Defending the faith requires more than knowledge. It requires an artful method. Often a clever apologist can outmaneuver someone who is more intelligent or has better arguments on the table at the moment. Let us look at some tactics that might help ambassadors for Christ to use apologetics to advance the Reign of God.

Previewing this Dissertation

The first chapter of this essay is dedicated to inculcating the Vatican II's vision of Catholic defense. Many scholars seem to think that ecumenical theology and/or interreligious dialogue have trumped the use of apologetics in the Catholic Church since Vatican II. But nothing could be further from the truth. Soon to be shown, the Council

endorses at least four different models of Catholic defense. This models approach will be discussed in the first chapter.

Before turning to the different approaches, however, it is imperative to discuss the problem of faith and reason in a postmodern context (chapter 2). This discussion needs to be mentioned because it would be useless to defend Christian claims unless they are first construed as universally true. The title of the second chapter, “Does Postmodern Relativism Defeat Apologetics?,” is not meant to be a refutation of postmodernism. Many good things have come from the demise of the modern age for the purposes of religious faith. But there is an element of postmodernism that needs to be addressed if the apologetic enterprise is to make sense to theologians and potential converts. Postmodernism serves as a construct of truth, and it also serves as a corrective to the errors of modernism.

The first model is called “scholastic apologetics” (chapter 3). Vatican II also called for a *reasoned* faith, and, at times, reiterates and defends the teaching of *Dei Filius* on the natural knowability of the existence of God. The Jesuit theologian John Hardon writes:

Among the satisfying features of the Catholic faith is seeing how providentially, sometimes prophetically, the Church’s magisterium anticipates the needs of the future. Who would have thought, as early as 1870, that by 1970 almost one-third of the human race would be under the political domination of an ideology that professedly excludes the existence of a personal God? Yet in 1870 the same Council that elaborated the divine attributes to strengthen the faith of believing Christians also evaluated the position of those who, only vaguely then, were devising to supplant the divine majesty ... By the second half the twentieth century, loss of faith in God or indifference to his existence had assumed global proportions. Vatican II took stock of the situation in the longest and most elaborate analysis of atheism in the sixteen hundred years of conciliar history. This fact alone gives some indication of how different are the issues facing the Church today from those that threatened its integrity during the days of Arius, Nestorius, and Pelagius.¹⁷

¹⁷ John A. Hardon, *The Catholic Catechism* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 58, 60.

Vatican II displayed more historical consciousness and cultural awareness than Vatican I, but the former also emphasized the validity of permanent truths.¹⁸ *Gaudium et Spes* reaffirmed the twofold order of faith and reason and praised Aquinas's theology as a model for understanding this relationship.¹⁹ This apologetic concern of the Council seems appropriate in a post-Vatican II context. Regardless if one is Catholic, Protestant, Anglican, or Eastern Orthodox, believers can empathize with the deleterious effects that atheism and unbelief is having on Christendom and society.

A second model focuses on *evidence* (thus chapter 4). Because the Council coincided with the third quest for the historical Jesus, I will focus on the importance of evidence for Christ's resurrection. The newest quest for the historical Jesus has ushered in a strong wave of apologetic writings defending the historicity of Jesus' resurrection.

According to I. Howard Marshall:

Why, then, should it be thought odd to offer to twentieth century audiences the historical backing that they need in order to know whether they should commit themselves in faith to the Jesus who is subject of Christian preaching? Modern people want to know if Jesus really existed. They want to know if he was the kind of person that the Gospels make him out to be. They want to know if he died and rose from the dead. They want to know whether his general manner of life supports the claims made on his behalf by Christians. And they are entitled to receive answers to these questions.²⁰

The main evidence considered usually consists of the post-mortem appearances of Jesus to individuals, groups, and enemies, the discovery of an open and empty tomb by a group of Jesus' women followers, and the origin of the earliest disciples' belief in the resurrection despite their predispositions to the contrary.

For the most part skeptics have taken these reported facts seriously but have tried to account for them in naturalistic terms. Another salient component of earliest

¹⁸ *Gaudium et Spes*, 10; *Dignitatis Humanae*, 3.

¹⁹ *Gaudium et Spes*, 10, 59.

²⁰ I Howard Marshall, *I Believe in the Historical Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 83.

Christianity is the Church's worship and devotional life. This phenomenon has been outlined and explained by brilliant scholars such as Larry Hurtado, Richard Bauckham, and James Dunn. And yet, most apologists in the newest quest have neglected to interact with their pioneering work. I will also survey the most salient criticisms of the resurrection hypothesis and address them as well.

The third model focuses on human *experience* (chapter 5). Echoing the theology of the Council, for instance, John Paul II wrote: "This universal presence of the Saints is in fact a proof of the transcendent power of the Spirit. It is the sign and proof of God's victory over the forces and evil which divide humanity."²¹ The four ecclesial attributes of the Church (one, holy, catholic, and apostolic) exert a special attraction for evangelists, ecumenists, and apologists today. Indeed, so strong is the encounter with vibrant Christian communities that it can bring about conversions.²² By *their* fruits we will know *God*. The ordinary person is not usually persuaded to believe in Christ through arguments as much as they are concerned to see God's work in people.²³ As John Henry Newman said, "as 'the heavens declare the glory of God' as Creator, so are the saints the proper and true evidence of the God of Christianity, and tell out into all lands the power and grace of Him who made them. . . They are the popular evidence of Christianity."²⁴

Although the argument of this chapter is *not* based upon a phenomenological encounter with holiness, it tries to elucidate some of the positive changes that Christian cultures have left upon the world for the better. This chapter tries to make sense out of the objection: "Does Christian belief make a difference in the lives of believers?" These

²¹ John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, N. 84.

²² Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, N. 50.

²³ Avery Dulles, "Seven Essentials of Evangelization," *Origins*, 25.23, (November 23, 1995): 400.

²⁴ V.F. Blehl, *The Essential Newman* (New York: Mentor Omega, 1963): 334.

changes can be highlighted to reinvigorate an almost forgotten argument in the Catholic Church known as the *via empirica*. Notwithstanding the positive changes found in cultures that are unaffected by institutional Christianity, the *via empirica* can be defended in a postconciliar church on behalf of the Divine Founder. Given the basic truth of Christiana faith (see chapters 1 and 2), it is imperative that we show its practical relevance in this chapter.

Here I have briefly explained each of the models and what will be discussed in this dissertation. In the conclusion I will explain how they all resonate together given the Council's endorsement of the multi-models approach. I will show how the different models are complementary given the different problems that have been highlighted in each of these cases.

CONCILIAR APOLOGETICS: AN INTEGRATED MODEL OF CATHOLIC DEFENSE

Recognizing that Christians cannot adequately understand the mysteries of faith from a single vantage point, Catholic theologians have been keen on emphasizing the multidimensional nature of theological understanding since Vatican II. Avery Dulles, for instance, convincingly argued that many of the debated conceptions of the Church proposed by different theologians throughout Church history were complementary rather than contradictory.²⁵ Many theologians followed Dulles' multiple-models approach since the early 1970's when the book was first published.²⁶ The advantage of such a method has helped believers to understand the rich, in-depth quality of Catholic faith.

One of the fields of theology which has not been discussed in the models approach, however, is apologetics—the art and science of defending the doctrines and practices of the Catholic Church. When all of the relevant passages in the documents of Vatican II are taken into consideration, a unique apologetical approach emerges that incorporates key advances as they emerged historically from the Church's apologists. Each of the individual apologetic systems from the past will be shown to have its own particular strengths and weaknesses.

By way of contrast, I will demonstrate that an important way to express the Gospel in a post-conciliar church is to advance the integrated model of the Council. This model will be called “combinationalism.” The interests and views of the apologists are

²⁵ Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1974).

²⁶ Some other examples would include Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992); Sallie McFague, *Models of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1987); Kevin W. Erwin, *Models of the Eucharist* (Mahwah: Paulist, 2005); Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, rev. exp. ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002).

therefore proven to be complementary rather than competing according to conciliar teaching.

As the Catholic Church became increasingly aware of the plurality of thought patterns and the various ways in which inculturation takes place, the Catholic bishops recognized that different needs and personality types will demand different approaches to evangelization. All believers come to faith through different means. The integrated model of Vatican II helps apologists and evangelists to recognize that although one approach to Catholic defense might be needed in a certain context, it would be a foolish mistake to take that one system and use it as the exclusive means to reach persons situated within different circumstances and cultural contexts. Similarly, no single personality type will carry that same measure of credibility or effectiveness in all environments.

An Apologetics of Decline and Renewal

Many Catholics have a difficult time with anything that resembles a defense of the faith. These critics seem to recast the same arguments that were repeatedly lashed out against the manualist approach to apologetics which prevailed prior to Vatican II. This approach was merely one way to defend the faith. Since these generalizations are still heard today, the discipline as a whole tends to get a bad name. As Paul Griffiths rightly observes:

‘Apologetics’ has itself become a term laden with negative connotations: to be an apologist for the truth of one religious claim or set of claims over against another is, in certain circles, seen as not far short of being a racist. And the term has passed into popular currency, to the extent that it has, as a simple label for argument in the service of

a predetermined orthodoxy, argument concerned not to demonstrate but to convince, and, if conviction should fail, to browbeat into submission.²⁷

Surely the “fighting words” of the apologist seem out of touch with Vatican II’s more inclusive, dialogical stance. The result of this anti-apologetical mindset is played out in theology curriculums in Catholic colleges across the United States. Apologist Peter Kreeft of Boston College writes: “My own college, the nation’s second largest Catholic university—and, I think, in most ways a very fine one—has a theology department that offers about fifty different courses each year; but for over a decade not one of them has been in apologetics.”²⁸

There are many other reasons for the decline in Catholic apologetics. Imitating the Enlightenment philosophers’ search for indubitable certainty in what is known as classical foundationalism, apologists from the time of the Reformation until Vatican II generally sought to rationally demonstrate the truth of the Catholic Church through a cumulative, step-by-step method. “Its presentation,” Benedict Ashley explains, “often suffered from two grave defects. First, it was developed in a *rationalistic* manner as if faith were the conclusion of a syllogism rather than a gift of God surpassing the mode of all human reason and involving not only the human intelligence but also the totality of the human person.

Second, it was presented in a manner which neglected our pluralistic culture and contradicted our commitment to ecumenism.”²⁹ Although the more narrowly-conceived pre-Vatican II apologetical approach proved fecund in for a time, it bore epistemological weaknesses that would render it ill equipped for a “post-Christian” age, to wit, an age in

²⁷ Paul J. Griffiths, *An Apology for Apologetics: A Study in the Logic of Interreligious Dialogue* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2008), 2.

²⁸ Peter Kreeft, *Fundamentals of the Faith* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988), 15.

²⁹ Benedict M. Ashley, *Choosing a World-View and Value System: An Ecumenical Apologetics* (New York: Alba House, 2000), x.

which the Church no longer holds the same authority or power over worldly affairs that it once had, and one in which there was a multiplexity of spiritualities or spiritual “options.”

Third, the rise of biblical studies in Catholicism also turned theologians away from the general defense of dogma. Scriptural theology almost became the norm for doing all of theology. Third, Thomistic philosophy—a staple of Catholic apologetical methodology—became increasingly fragmented in the middle of the twentieth century.³⁰ There were existential Thomists (J. Maritain, E. Gilson), transcendental Thomists (K. Rahner, J. Maréchal, B. Lonergan), orthodox or strict observance Thomists (A. Gardeil, R. Labourdette, R. Garrigou-Lagrange), eclectic Thomists, and Aristotelian Thomists (R. McInerney). To be a ‘Thomist’ could mean a variety of things.

Fourth, if the rise of biblical studies and the intramural debates within Thomism were not enough, the burgeoning need to become more aware, concerned, and appreciative of historical and cultural contexts seemed to drive a stake through the classical apologist’s heart. Apologists naively thought they could defend the faith without considering the contingencies of time and place. Fifth, the emergence of the *nouvelle theologie* made strident headway into Catholic intellectual circles. This movement called for a resourcement to the theologies and spiritualities of the early Church Fathers. Some of the pioneering theologians of the *nouvelle theologie* included Jean Danielou, Henri De Lubac, Aloys Grillmeier, Yves Congar, and Louis Bouyer.

Lastly, the liturgical movement, which began at the beginning of the twentieth century, also detracted from the longstanding emphasis on defending the faith.

³⁰ Gerald McCool, *The Neo-Thomists, From Unity to Diversity: The Internal Evolution of Thomism* (New York: Fordham University, 1992); idem, *The Neo-Thomists* (Milwaukee: Marquette University, 1994).

Each of these factors led to a serious reevaluation of apologetical method and, for a time, fomented a radical decline of active, apologetical praxis. But, as Avery Dulles espies, we are now witnessing “the rebirth of apologetics.”³¹ He is encouraged to observe that, while many Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, and other Protestants depreciate the discipline of apologetics, Evangelicals have been taking the lead in presenting first-rate arguments in reputable journals and other publications in defense of the faith. But he is not completely in favor of the style of apologetics that Evangelicals have generally upheld, for it seems to resemble the one-sided approach that prevailed before Vatican II in Catholic circles—the approach that Catholics should reject as ineffective for deeply inculcating the faith in a more holistic manner. Dulles cautions that the discipline needs to be shaped under the broader theological vision of the Council.

Although the revival of Catholic apologetics is still young and maybe even uncertain, it needs to be nurtured by scholars now working in the mainstream. Arguing against popular level Catholic apologists, Richard Gaillardetz is one of few Catholic theologians who has described what a postconciliar apologetics might look like.³² William Cardinal Levada—the current Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith—has defended the use of classical apologetics, but wants to see it mended from its earlier epistemological shortcomings. For Levada, it can be reformulated in a way that is consistent with Catholic theology.³³

³¹ Avery Dulles, “The Rebirth of Apologetics,” *First Things* 143 (May 2004), 18-23.

³² Richard Gaillardetz, “Do We Need a New(er) Apologetics?,” *America* (February 2, 2004). http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=3390. See also Richard Gaillardetz, “Apologetics, Evangelization, and Ecumenism Today,” *Origins* 35.1 (May 19, 2005), 9-15. See also Thomas P. Rausch, *Reconciling Faith and Reason: Apologists, Evangelists, and Theologians in a Divided Church* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2000), 35-52.

³³ For the full speech by the Cardinal, see <http://www.zenit.org/article-29086?l=english>

What is sorely lacking in most of these discussions is reference to the salient passages of the Council that speak about Catholic defense. An analysis of the Council might help to alleviate the tension that anti-apologists have with defending the faith, and it might also help popular level apologists to round out an approach that is more in line with earlier Catholic traditions.

In Defense of Conciliar Apologetics

Pope John XXIII originally called for the Second Vatican Council to let some fresh air into the life of the Church. His intention was not to break off from Sacred Tradition. As theologian Francis Martin writes: “It is, after all, not a council’s role to embark on new speculative teaching but rather to clarify and substantiate the Church’s traditional teaching and to elucidate the way in which it is a light to the pilgrim Church of the present and the future.”³⁴ Correct readings of Vatican II will therefore include the older methods of Catholic apologetics, but will correct the mistakes within these approaches.

According to the Vatican I document on faith and reason, *Dei Filius*, for instance, God reveals himself supernaturally,³⁵ conveying truths that go beyond the reach of human reason. This message is accompanied by the outward signs of miracles and prophecies which show the credibility of God’s revelation. Once this revelation is given to humanity, it is capable of being penetrated rationally in order for people to gain a

³⁴ Francis Martin, “Revelation and its Transmission,” in Matthew L. Lamb and Matthew Levering, (ed.), *Vatican II: Renewal Within Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2008), 55.

³⁵ When I refer to God’s supernatural revelation, I speak of the disclosure of Godself in a way that cannot be ordinarily known by common human experience. According to Catholic theology, this revelation of Godself takes place in human history. And, without this divine disclosure, persons remain cognitively ignorant of the truth about God.

greater understanding of it. This apologetical method resembles the method of classical (scholastic) apologetics.

So although Vatican II did not elaborate on any *method* of apologetics in detail, this does not mean the Council Fathers did not see classical apologetics as unimportant or irrelevant. As Catholic theologian M. John Farrelly rightly points out: “Vatican II gave primacy to the meaning of God and Jesus Christ but also insisted that reason, common human experience, and the historical value of the Gospels support our faith in the existence of God and his revelation through Jesus Christ.”³⁶ One could mention many other themes which did not have a prominent role in the Council: trinity, incarnation, pneumatology, protology, harmartiology, angelology, etc.. Yet all of these disciplines still play a significant role in contemporary Catholic theology.

There can be no denying the official conciliar endorsement of apologetics. Appealing to the central apologetics passage of the New Testament (1 Pet. 3:15), the bishops urge that “all the disciples of Christ, persevering in prayer and praising God, should present themselves as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. Everywhere on earth they must bear witness to Christ and give an answer to those who seek an account of that hope of eternal life which is in them.”³⁷

In the *Declaration on Religious Liberty*, the Fathers state that “The disciple has a grave obligation to Christ, his Master, to grow daily in his knowledge of the truth he has received from him, to be faithful in announcing it, and vigorous in defending it without having recourse to methods which are contrary to the spirit of the Gospel.”³⁸ Though Catholics can persuade unbelievers over to faith in Jesus by their lifestyle, this would not

³⁶ M. John Farrelly, *Belief in God in Our Time* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1992), 46.

³⁷ *Lumen Gentium*, 10.

³⁸ *Dignitatis Humanae*, 14.

mean that words, and, by implication, argumentation should not be included in the attempt to evangelize others.³⁹

The task of defending the faith is commanded by the Church, especially as believers become more accountable to God's standards of Christian discipleship. Christians "are more perfectly bound to the Church by the sacrament of Confirmation, and the Holy Spirit endows them with special strength so that they are more strictly obliged to spread and defend the faith, both by word and by deed, as true witnesses of Christ."⁴⁰

Catholics are not merely called to dialogue with non-Christians, but must seek to convert them to the Risen Christ.⁴¹ The *Constitution on Divine Revelation* goes so far as to say that we must "fight in defense of the faith." Of course, this rhetorical phrase is stressing the great lengths that Catholics must go in order to preserve the Church's doctrine against the multitude of challenges that confront us:

And so the apostolic preaching, which is expressed in a special way in the inspired books, was to be preserved by an unending succession of preachers until the end of time. Therefore the Apostles, handing on what they themselves had received, warn the faithful to hold fast to the traditions which they have learned either by word of mouth or by letter (see 2 Thess. 2:15), and to fight in defense of the faith handed on once and for all (see Jude 1:3).⁴²

Believers have the duty to defend the faith, but the task of "safeguarding" the Gospel is officially entrusted to the Magisterium: ". . . the task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ." Moreover, "This teaching office is not above the word of God,

³⁹ *Lumen Gentium*, 11, 19, 23, 24, 25, 28.

⁴⁰ *Lumen Gentium*, 11.

⁴¹ *Ad Gentes*, 30, 39, 39, 40. This statement should be taken into context in the Council. The Catholic Church recognizes that Jews can find salvation through their own religion. See the relevant passages in Vatican II's *Nostra Aetate*.

⁴² *Dei Verbum*, 8.

but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously and explaining it faithfully in accord with a divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it draws from this one deposit of faith everything which it presents for belief as divinely revealed.”⁴³ Bishops are called to be both practical and theoretical defenders of the Church.⁴⁴

One of the great themes of *Gaudium et Spes* has to do with reading the signs of the times in order to effectively answer persons’ deepest questions about God and humanity.⁴⁵ Hence, “The Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel. Thus, in language intelligible to each generation, she can respond to the perennial questions which men ask about this present life and the life to come, and about the relationship of the one to the other.”⁴⁶ In reading the culture, Catholics are not only called to engage outsiders with arguments, they must learn effective *ways* to do it. Method and context must therefore be taken into consideration for effective evangelization to take place:⁴⁷ “within the requirements and methods proper to theology, [men and women] are invited to seek continually for more suitable ways of communicating doctrine to the men of their times; for the deposit of Faith or the truths are one thing and the manner in which they are enunciated, in the same meaning and understanding, is another.”⁴⁸ In *Christus Dominus*, we read that the bishops should be presenting the Gospel in a way that is conducive to the modern mindset.⁴⁹

⁴³ *Dei Verbum* 10.

⁴⁴ *Christus Dominus*, 13.

⁴⁵ *Gaudium et Spes*, 10, 11, 12, 41.

⁴⁶ *Gaudium et Spes*, 4

⁴⁷ *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 6, 13, 25, 27; *Ad Gentes*, 10, 20, 21; *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 10, 17; *Perfectae Caritatis*, 20.

⁴⁸ *Gaudium et Spes*, 62.

⁴⁹ *Christus Dominus*, 13.

Some preliminary conclusions about the conciliar vision of apologetics can now be drawn. First, Vatican II is unambiguously concerned about defending the faith. Arguments and evidence can be used for the sake of evangelization if the appropriate circumstances allow for it. However, we are to never force our dialogue partners into a win-lose situation. What is more, interreligious dialogue is not a substitute for apologetics. Conciliar apologetics has a practical and theoretical component for purposes of the evangelization.

We turn now, then, to the different ways the Council utilizes each apologetic model. Unlike the individual advocates of each system, Vatican II does not challenge the other viewpoints but includes them all within the broad range of her teaching. By implication, this means that at least certain versions of each model are compatible with one another.

Vatican II and Classical Apologetics (Scholastic Apologetics)

Even though the Council does not use the term “classical apologetics” in any of its documents, it endorses some of the key elements of this method. In the first place, the use of verbal argument is necessary for the purposes of evangelization: “Christ, the great Prophet, who proclaimed the Kingdom of His Father both by the testimony of His life and the power of His words...does this not only through the hierarchy who teach in His name and with His authority, but also through the laity whom He made His witnesses and to whom He gave understanding of the faith (*sensu fidei*) and an attractiveness in speech so that the power of the Gospel might shine forth in their daily social and family life.”⁵⁰

⁵⁰ *Lumen Gentium*, 35.

Verbal discourse (and, by implication, friendly debate) is therefore encouraged for the sake of evangelization.

There are many places in *Dei Verbum* where the Council Fathers insist that the faith must be preached in words (and not just in deeds). The direct implication is that by preaching one must give reasons for the things that are said. Because Christ taught with words, the faith must be taught and thus defended in the same way.⁵¹ Appealing to this common sense approach to evangelization, *Gaudium et Spes* affirms that the more one loves in action, the more one will speak the truth.⁵² Apologetics, then, can serve as a form of compassion for evangelists:

Love and good will, . . . must in no way render us indifferent to truth and goodness. Indeed love itself impels the disciples of Christ to speak the saving truth to all men. But it is necessary to distinguish between error, which always merits repudiation, and the person in error, who never loses the dignity of being a person even when he is flawed by false or inadequate religious notions. God alone is the judge and searcher of hearts; for that reason He forbids us to make judgments about the internal guilt of anyone.⁵³

Following the lead of *Dei Filius*, the natural knowledge of God is reaffirmed in the Council.⁵⁴ Traditionally the Church has not held that individuals can know that God exists only through faith. That would be fideistic and contrary to Catholic apologetics. The way that individuals can reason about God's existence is by considering the things that have been made. Hence, the move will be from effect to cause, not through an innate awareness of the idea of God (as in the case with the ontological argument). Thus the framers of *Dei Verbum* announce that: "God, the beginning and end of all things, can be known with certainty from created reality by the light of human reason (see Rom. 1:20); but teaches that it is through His revelation that those religious truths which are by their

⁵¹ *Dei Verbum*, 6, 7, 8, 9, 14, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 23, 24, 25 ; *Ad Gentes*, 15, 25; *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 6, 11, 13, 14.

⁵² *Gaudium et Spes*, 92.

⁵³ *Gaudium et Spes*, 28.

⁵⁴ *Dei Verbum*, 3; *Nostra Aetate*, 2.

nature accessible to human reason can be known by all men with ease, with solid certitude and with no trace of error, even in this present state of the human race.”⁵⁵

Keeping in line with the Church’s tradition apropos to natural theology, the Church approves of the argument from desire to the truth of Christianity.⁵⁶ People remain restless in their hearts until they experience the one true God. For example, if one begins with a proper understanding of the human person, Christian teaching is seen as the best fit for humanity.⁵⁷ The bishops assert:

Above all the Church knows that her message is in harmony with the most secret desires of the human heart when she champions the dignity of the human vocation, restoring hope to those who have already despaired of anything higher than their present lot. Far from diminishing man, her message brings to his development light, life and freedom. Apart from this message nothing will avail to fill up the heart of man: ‘Thou hast made us for Thyself,’ O Lord, ‘and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee.’⁵⁸

Hence, the human person has a natural knowledge of God’s existence, nature and providence over creation. This aspect to conciliar teaching is an indispensable element of classical apologetics. For this method begins with the truths accessible from natural theology.

The Church boldly favors the use of human reason: “In her loyal devotion to God and men, the Church has already repudiated and cannot cease repudiating, sorrowfully but as firmly as possible, those poisonous doctrines and actions which contradict reason and the common experience of humanity, and dethrone man from his native excellence.”⁵⁹ Indeed, rational argument should not be dismissed in light of the problem of atheism—whether it is of the critical or practical variety. Indeed, the Church

⁵⁵ *Dei Verbum*, 6. Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 12

⁵⁶ *Gaudium et Spes*, 18.

⁵⁷ *Gaudium et Spes*, 21, 36, 41, 41, 45, 58.

⁵⁸ *Gaudium et Spes*, 21.

⁵⁹ *Gaudium et Spes*, 21.

“courteously invites atheists to examine the Gospel of Christ with an open mind.”⁶⁰ This passage provides an endorsement of classical apologetics (and could be used to support the Council’s endorsement of rational apologetics as a whole). Subsequent endorsements of rational uses of apologetics will also be seen in encyclicals such as *Fides et Ratio* and Benedict XVI’s lecture at the University of Regensburg.⁶¹

Similarly, in *Optatum Totius*, the Council affirms that seminarians must study *philosophy* for the purposes of defending the doctrines of Catholicism: “The history of philosophy should be so taught that the students, while reaching the ultimate principles of the various systems, will hold on to what is proven to be true therein and will be able to detect the roots of errors and to refute them.”⁶² Hence the study of philosophy should be designed to foster an apologetical spirit in those men studying for the priesthood.

Vatican II and Evidential Apologetics

Elements of the evidentialism are also upheld in the conciliar documents. By viewing science, history, psychology, and human beings in the correct way, it becomes easier to perceive the truth of the Gospel. According to *Gaudium et Spes*: “When man gives himself to the various disciplines of philosophy, history and of mathematical and natural science, and when he cultivates the arts, he can do very much to elevate the human family to a more sublime understanding of truth, goodness, and beauty, and to the

⁶⁰ *Gaudium et Spes*, 21.

⁶¹ John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, 67. See also Pope Benedict XVI, ‘Faith, Reason and the University Memories and Reflections’, Lecture at the University of Regensburg, Germany, September 12, 2006. Can be found online at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg_en.html. See also Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI), “Relativism: The Central Problem for Faith Today,” *Origins* 26.20 (October 31, 1996): 316.

⁶² *Optatum Totius*, 15. Cf. *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 3.

formation of considered opinions which have universal value.”⁶³ Interpreting the secular world in Catholic terms is an important theme of the entire Council.⁶⁴

In the *Decree on Priestly Formation*, for instance, the bishops remark that recent findings in the social sciences can provide an effective means to win people over to religious vocations.⁶⁵ The use of science can be used for evangelical purposes, whether evangelization is directed to outsiders or those inside the church. In the *Declaration on Christian Education* it is said that part of developing a Catholic view of the world, the cosmos, and human beings will include skills to defend Catholicism.⁶⁶ As the bishops put it:

A Christian education does not merely strive for the maturing of a human person as just now described, but has as its principal purpose this goal: that the baptized . . . learn not only how to bear witness to the hope that is in them (cf. Peter 3:15) but also how to help in the Christian formation of the world that takes place when natural powers viewed in the full consideration of man redeemed by Christ contribute to the good of the whole society.⁶⁷

One of the roles of faculties in Catholic schools is to teach the various aspects of theology and the other sciences in order to foster a deeper understanding of revelation, its plausibility, and internal coherence.⁶⁸

An affinity for the use of historical evidence is found in *Lumen Gentium*: “The Miracles of Jesus also confirm that the Kingdom has already arrived on earth: ‘If I cast out devils by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.’ Before all things, however, the Kingdom is clearly visible in the very Person of Christ, the Son of God and the Son of Man, who came ‘to serve and to give His life as a ransom for

⁶³ *Gaudium et Spes*, 57.

⁶⁴ *Lumen Gentium*, 36; *Gaudium et Spes*, 21, 43, 76; *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 14, 16, 19, 20; *Gravissimum Educationis*, 1.

⁶⁵ *Optatum Totius*, 2

⁶⁶ *Gravissimum Educationis*, 3, 10, 12.

⁶⁷ *Gravissimum Educationis*, 2.

⁶⁸ *Gravissimum Educationis*, 11.

many.”⁶⁹ Christ’s life is apologetical in the sense that he testifies to the reality of the Kingdom.⁷⁰ A historical approach to Jesus’ life can therefore help one to see the truth about God and his love for humanity. Seen in this way, Christ’s life is apologetical. A historical and theological study of the person of Jesus can convince others that his message is indeed trustworthy. Christ himself gave compelling evidence of the truths he preached.⁷¹ As the bishops explain in another place: “It is common knowledge that among all the Scriptures, even those of the New Testament, the Gospels have a special preeminence, and rightly so, for they are the principal witness for the life and teaching of the incarnate Word, our savior.”⁷²

Dei Verbum affirms the fundamental historicity of the Gospels. However, this would not mean that the Gospels are straightforward, historical reports, but that they are reliable at the core: “Holy Mother Church has firmly and with absolute constancy held, and continues to hold, that the four Gospels just named, whose historical character the Church unhesitatingly asserts, faithfully hand on what Jesus Christ, while living among men, really did and taught for their eternal salvation until the day He was taken up into heaven (see Acts 1:1)”⁷³ In corroboration of this point, the bishops announce that the Four Evangelists’ original intention was transposed from their recollections of the original eyewitnesses’ beliefs to relay the truth about Christ.⁷⁴

Moreover, a historical and sociological study of the Church’s influence upon the world might be persuasive to inquirers.⁷⁵ Conversely, “it must be admitted that the

⁶⁹ *Lumen Gentium*, 35.

⁷⁰ *Lumen Gentium*, 5. Cf. *Dei Verbum*, 4; cf. *Dignitatis Humanae*, 11; *Ad Gentes*, 9.

⁷¹ *Gaudium et Spes*, 3.

⁷² *Dei Verbum*, 18.

⁷³ *Dei Verbum*, 19.

⁷⁴ *Dei Verbum*, 19.

⁷⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 812.

temporal sphere is governed by its own principles, since it is rightly concerned with the interests of this world. But that ominous doctrine which attempts to build a society with no regard whatever for religion, and which attacks and destroys the religious liberty of its citizens, is rightly to be rejected.”⁷⁶

Vatican II and Experiential Apologetics

Experientialism is the premiere model of the Council. Like a splash of cool water, this model compensates for the heavy intellectualism of the other systems. Perhaps the pastoral concern of the bishops provides the reason for this emphasis at the Council. In *Gaudium et Spes*, we read: “The People of God believe that it is led by the Lord's Spirit, Who fills the earth. Motivated by this faith, it labors to decipher authentic signs of God's presence and purpose in the happenings, needs and desires in which this People has a part along with other men of our age.”⁷⁷ The witness of a holy life makes the faith more believable.⁷⁸ Indeed, as Catholics we are “living witnesses to him.”⁷⁹ Mother Church “exhorts her children to purification and renewal so that the sign of Christ may shine more brightly over the face of the earth.”⁸⁰

Apostolicam Actuositatem insists that all persons are called to testify to the Lord's presence by the manner of their life: “The very testimony of their Christian life and good works done in a supernatural spirit have the power to draw men to belief and to God.”⁸¹ Impelled by the love of Christ, those who have faith and seek to advance the kingdom

⁷⁶ *Lumen Gentium*, 36.

⁷⁷ *Gaudium et Spes*, 11.

⁷⁸ *Lumen Gentium*, 4, 10, 31, 33, 35, 36.

⁷⁹ *Lumen Gentium*, 12.

⁸⁰ *Lumen Gentium*, 15.

⁸¹ *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 6.

inevitably draw men to Christ.⁸² The evidential power of human holiness is repeatedly maintained.⁸³ Pastors should remember that in their daily conduct and concern for the members of the parish they testify to the Gospel to the world. In so doing, outsiders will judge whether the Christian message is indeed worthy of belief.⁸⁴ Unless priests are personally holy, they will be ineffective as Catholic evangelists.⁸⁵ Indeed, the best apologetic maneuver for winning persons over to join religious communities is seen in the life of its members.⁸⁶

The Church itself is a sacrament which points to the Savior, especially when it radiates with prayer and holiness in the context of liturgical worship.⁸⁷ As *Presbyterorum Ordinis* states: “The ecclesial community by prayer, example, and works of penance, exercise a true motherhood toward souls who are to be led to Christ. The Christian community forms an effective instrument by which the path to Christ and his Church is pointed out and made smooth for non-believers. It is an effective instrument also for arousing, nourishing and strengthening the faithful for their spiritual combat.”⁸⁸

Similarly, the liturgy is capable of building people up so that they might shine forth as a reason for outsiders to become Catholic.⁸⁹ When believers fail to live up to their calling, this can serve as an anti-sacrament, repelling outsiders to faith.⁹⁰ In *Perfectae Caritatis* it is said that a materialistic way of life can detract from the *apologia*

⁸² *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 4.

⁸³ *Christus Dominus*, 15; *Perfectae Caritatis*, 5; *Optatum Totius*, 2; *Ad Gentes*, 8, 11. *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 5, 29.

⁸⁴ *Gaudium et Spes*, 43.

⁸⁵ Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 21, 24, 25, 26, 28, 41. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 12.

⁸⁶ *Perfectae Caritatis*, 24.

⁸⁷ *Lumen Gentium*, 9.

⁸⁸ *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 6.

⁸⁹ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 2, 7, 33, 47, 59, 60; *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 16; *Ad Gentes*, 15.

⁹⁰ *Gaudium et Spes*, 43. Cf. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 4

of religious communities.⁹¹ For instance, the response to outsiders should not be on providing sophisticated philosophical refutations, but on living a life that can convince persons to think in spiritual terms: “Since in our times, different forms of materialism are spread far and wide even among Catholics, the laity should not only learn doctrine more diligently, especially those main points which are the subjects of controversy, but should also exhibit the witness of an evangelical life in contrast to all forms of materialism.”⁹²

Under the greater theme of holiness are more specific themes such as the witness of the saints:⁹³ In the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, the Council Fathers write:

When we look at the lives of those who have faithfully followed Christ, we are inspired with a new reason for seeking the City that is to come and at the same time we are shown a most safe path by which among the vicissitudes of this world, in keeping with the state in life and condition proper to each of us, we will be able to arrive at perfect union with Christ, that is, perfect holiness. In the lives of those who, sharing in our humanity, are however more perfectly transformed into the image of Christ, God vividly manifests His presence and His face to men. He speaks to us in them, and gives us a sign of His Kingdom, to which we are strongly drawn, having so great a cloud of witnesses over us and such a witness to the truth of the Gospel.⁹⁴

The witness of martyrdom,⁹⁵ the domestic church,⁹⁶ and celibacy⁹⁷ all help in the Catholic Church’s in her case for saving faith. Poverty and charity also serve as motives of credibility.⁹⁸ Sacred art has a persuasive effect on observers of Catholic worship. In *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, sacred art and architecture is thought to be fruitful for evangelism.⁹⁹

When the Church qualitatively manifests the four ecclesial attributes (oneness, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity), this can also provide compelling evidence for

⁹¹ *Perfectae Caritatis*, 14.

⁹² *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 31.

⁹³ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 4.

⁹⁴ *Lumen Gentium*, 60.

⁹⁵ *Gaudium et Spes*, 21; *Ad Gentes*, 24. *Lumen Gentium*, 42, 50.

⁹⁶ *Gaudium et Spes*, 48.

⁹⁷ *Ad Gentes*, 18; *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 16; *Lumen Gentium*, 13, 33, 43; *Optatum Totius*, 10.

⁹⁸ *Lumen Gentium*, 8. Cf. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 17, 21; *Gaudium et Spes*, 21, 88. Cf. *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 8; *Ad Gentes*, 6, 12, 36; *Perfectae Caritatis*, 1, 11

⁹⁹ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 122, 127.

Catholicism.¹⁰⁰ The writers of *Unitatis Redintegratio* insist that divisions within the Body of Christ becomes anti-sacramental, destroying the Church's witness before the world: "Such division. . .damages the holy cause of preaching the Gospel to every creature."¹⁰¹ In its *Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church*, the Council asserts that: "The division among Christians damages the most holy cause of preaching the Gospel to every creature and blocks the way to the faith for many."¹⁰² But when the Church is truly one, she becomes effective in the apologetic case for faith. Christians should anticipate the one visible church of God so that the world might be converted to the Risen Christ.¹⁰³ To be sure, the fact that local churches could share common aspirations for unity counts as evidence of the Gospel.¹⁰⁴ Unity is a significant concern of the Council for the sake of evangelism.¹⁰⁵ Collaborating together in united action is an effective means of effectively reaching the world with the Good News.¹⁰⁶

Theological Apologetics and Vatican II

It is imperative to teach Catholic doctrine correctly so that the world might come to believe in the one true Savior.¹⁰⁷ False doctrines can destroy belief, but accurate presentations of Catholicism can make it easier for persons to see the inner-rationale of Catholic beliefs. "Therefore, following in the footsteps of the Council of Trent and of the First Vatican Council, this present council wishes to set forth authentic doctrine on divine

¹⁰⁰ *Gaudium et Spes*, 43, 45, 76, 92; *Optatum Totius*, 9; *Ad Gentes*, 4, 8.

¹⁰¹ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 1, cf. 12.

¹⁰² *Ad Gentes*, 6.

¹⁰³ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 1

¹⁰⁴ *Lumen Gentium*, 23.

¹⁰⁵ *Lumen Gentium*, 23, 28. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 8; *Ad Gentes*, 21, 23; *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 16; *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 27.

¹⁰⁶ *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 20, 23.

¹⁰⁷ *Gaudium et Spes*, 21.

revelation and how it is handed on, so that by hearing the message of salvation the whole world may believe, by believing it may hope, and by hoping it may love.”¹⁰⁸

By contrast, teaching false doctrines (or living hypocritically) will ruin the Church’s witness for the sake of converting the world: “To the extent that they neglect their own training in the faith, or teach erroneous doctrine, or are deficient in their religious, moral or social life, they must be said to conceal rather than reveal the authentic face of God and religion.”¹⁰⁹

Because all Scripture is divinely inspired and is useful for refuting error (2 Tim. 3:15- 17), it is also useful for evangelical purposes. The Fathers contend that hearing Scripture can literally open up the minds of its hearers for them to be receptive to the Spirit:

For in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them; and the force and power in the word of God is so great that it stands as the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her sons, the food of the soul, the pure and everlasting source of spiritual life. Consequently these words are perfectly applicable to Sacred Scripture: ‘For the word of God is living and active’ (Heb. 4:12) and ‘it has power to build you up and give you your heritage among all those who are sanctified’ (Acts 20:32; see 1 Thess. 2:13).¹¹⁰

Thus a form of presuppositionalism seems to be upheld. By hearing and understanding the Scriptures the light of supernatural faith is bestowed on unbelievers and believers.¹¹¹

Thus the proclamation of the Gospel is capable of drawing men and women, regardless if they believe in Christ or not, to faith.¹¹²

The framers of *Presbyterorum Ordinis* also declare that preaching the word of God should not be abstract and overly generalized, but should address the particular circumstances that people commonly face in the world (in order to persuade them unto

¹⁰⁸ *Dei Verbum*, 1.

¹⁰⁹ *Gaudium et Spes*, 19.

¹¹⁰ *Dei Verbum*, 21.

¹¹¹ *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 4.

¹¹² *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 4.

deeper faith).¹¹³ If preachers exposit God’s word accurately, then this can open up the eyes of unbelievers. “Taught by the word and example of Christ, the Apostles followed the same way. From the very origins of the Church the disciples of Christ strove to convert men to faith in Christ as the Lord; not, however, by the use of coercion or of devices unworthy of the Gospel, but by the power, above all, of the word of God.”¹¹⁴ A passage in *Dignitatis Humanae* expresses the same understanding of presuppositionalism: “They followed the example of the gentleness and respectfulness of Christ and they preached the word of God in the full confidence that there was resident in this word itself a divine power able to destroy all the forces arrayed against God.”¹¹⁵

Negatively speaking, the Church denounces false philosophies such as scientism. Human “intelligence is not confined to observable data alone, but can with genuine certitude attain to reality itself as knowable, though in consequence of sin that certitude is partly obscured and weakened.”¹¹⁶

Gaudium et Spes is the only conciliar document which actually presents *arguments* against the philosophies undergirding unbelief.¹¹⁷ Marxist atheism, for example, holds that humanity is thwarted from true liberation by believing in God because it focuses our attention on things above, not on things of this earth.¹¹⁸ The Council Fathers respond: since human life does not end at the grave, all persons are held accountable for their actions during their earthly life. In the end the scales of justice will finally be balanced, and righteousness will prevail over evil. Every evil will therefore be

¹¹³ *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 4.

¹¹⁴ *Dignitatis Humanae*, 11.

¹¹⁵ *Dignitatis Humanae*, 11.

¹¹⁶ *Gaudium et Spes*, 15.

¹¹⁷ Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 33.

¹¹⁸ *Gaudium et Spes*, 20. See also 22: “Such is the mystery of man, and it is a great one, as seen by believers in the light of Christian revelation. Through Christ and in Christ, the riddles of sorrow and death grow meaningful. Apart from His Gospel, they overwhelm us.”

transformed for the greater good. Every decision that is made by Christians in this lifetime has eternal significance because there is something to hope for in the end. As a result, Christians should make decisions that run against contrarian pressures and embrace acts of extreme self-sacrifice in this world for the greater good.¹¹⁹

Integrating Models

Vatican II presents distinctive elements of each apologetic system. The Council's stress on reason (classical apologetics), facts (evidentialism), experience (experientialism), and Scripture and Church teaching (theological) all seem evident in the conciliar documents. What we do not see is an exclusive stance to any single model. The vision of conciliar apologetics should help theologians to recognize there is no single way to defend the fundamental claims of the Church about Jesus Christ.

By implication, there must be ways in which the systems work harmoniously together. Similar to the apologetical mind of the Council, it is not a coincidence that a kaleidoscopic picture of doctrine and practice is presented in Vatican II. As the Magisterium became increasingly aware of the challenges associated with globalization, she also recognized that the individual needs of persons are not all alike. Different thought patterns within each culture will demand different apologetic approaches for the purposes of evangelism. Everyone comes to faith through different means.

Even the most convinced apologists tend to gravitate to those methods that have personally affected them the most. Given the person-relative nature of evangelism, apologists should try to match their methods with the kind of person they are in dialogue with. Someone with an academic background who is capable of processing empirically

¹¹⁹ *Gaudium et Spes*, 21, 34, 39, 43.

based evidence might be influenced by evidentialism. Someone who struggles emotionally with the Church's claims should not be introduced to classical apologetics (which focuses on reason), but might be attentive to the warmth of the community of believers (thus experientialism). Confused individuals might be relieved by classical apologetics, which is concerned with building a gradual case for faith, one step at a time. Hence these individuals will not be sympathetic to classical apologetics.

Catholics must now consider intangible factors such as attitude, aptitude, personality, and background experiences when presenting the case for faith. They must also recognize that questions are often framed in different ways and so must be answered in ways that might further a constructive conversation. From this discussion of conciliar apologetics we have seen that Christians are not only called to provide answers to skeptics' questions and challenges, they must also live out the faith in holiness (thus the emphasis on experiential approaches). That is to say, they must not exclusively rely on classical apologetics and/or the evidential approach.

But it must be remembered that if one is holy, then they will use every means at their disposal to reach one's dialogue partner, not just ways that exclude the mind and verbal persuasion; holiness may be *more* than rational, but is certainly not *less* than rational. Conversely, if one uses rational argument, then this can become a means by which the Spirit sanctifies outsiders and even doubtful believers. The Tradition of the Church, the historical context of Vatican II, and the documents of the Council all testify to the fact that rational approaches to Catholic defense remain an indispensable component to discipleship, apologetics and evangelism.

Christian presuppositions will always affect the apologist. One cannot begin with *every* Christian belief from nowhere. However, according to Catholic theology, some of the mysteries of faith can be known by *all* normally functioning individuals without the help of divine, authoritative revelation. At this point the natural philosophy (God's existence, objectivity of truth, etc.) of the classical apologist gives the evangelist something that theological apologetics cannot provide him or her with. Indeed, without positing some mutually shared starting points with unbelievers and other doubters (which the classicalist can provide), the apologetic enterprise as a whole will collapse.¹²⁰ Indeed, presuppositionalist turns into fideism without the help of the universal philosophical conclusions that can be previously established by the classical apologist. If each and every mutually shared starting point with outsiders is illusory, then evangelists are forced to work out of the fideist theological mindset.

Alternatively, some uses of presuppositionalism can provide Catholics with the recognition that we must begin with Scriptural and ecclesiastical presuppositions. For all people interpret reality in a way that is consistent with their presuppositions, including unbelievers.

Nonetheless, it is commonly assumed that theological presuppositions can change through arguments and lived experience. Even if the apologetic mandate demands that Christians work with a certain set of presuppositions, this would not have to mean that the Gospel is irrational (or that evidences in favor of Christian faith cannot be trusted). Perhaps the Gospel is true and the evidence is trustworthy. As C.S. Lewis, that doyen of twentieth century apologists, wrote: "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has

¹²⁰ I defend this contention in the chapter on postmodernism and apologetics.

risen—not only because I see it, but because of it, I see everything else.”¹²¹ It is possible that Christians know the truth about God *because* of faith, not in spite of it. Again, what is needed to help one determine this is the careful weighing and assessing of the evidence. And this assessment is where the evidentialist and the classical apologist are again needed.

Classical apologists provide positive arguments for the Gospel. Proponents of this method argues *for* God’s existence, the reasonableness of Jesus’ divinity, and the divine origins of the Catholic Church. Presuppositionalists and evidentialists can complement the classicalist with negative arguments (arguments that deflect the challenges to Catholic belief and practice), demonstrating where competing viewpoints are fallacious or shortsighted. Not to be overlooked, the evidentialist and theological apologist can also provide positive arguments for faith. But the classicalist complements the evidentialist by providing the necessary philosophical framework that is needed for apologetic engagement to begin with. That is to say, evidence without a prior philosophical framework can be interpreted in a variety of ways. Thus proceeding with logical steps can be supplemented with the probabilistic evidences given by the evidentialist. The experiential apologist complements all three of these approaches, both negatively and positively, by providing an existential means of persuasion to outsiders and by reinforcing the commitment of lukewarm believers.

The experiential and the theoretical side of conciliar apologetics will provide a holistic approach to Catholic defense which is surely more effective than using one procedure in dialogue with all persons in every situation. Undoubtedly one method

¹²¹ C.S. Lewis, “Is Theology Poetry?,” *Essay Collection and Other Short Pieces* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 2000), 21.

should be privileged for a particular audience. But this would not mean that it should become the only method in the arsenal of the evangelist/apologist. So, in the post-conciliar era, we must recognize the importance of integrative apologetics systems. The integrative apologetic system of the Council might be conveniently called combinationalism.

Models of Catholic Apologetics in a Postconciliar Church

Throughout Church history, different apologetics systems have emerged in response to the various challenges posed to Catholic doctrine.¹²² Though there has never been a consensus on which way to categorize the approaches, they have all been used by different Christians who represent different denominations for various purposes and audiences (and/or critics). The advocates of each system have often castigated one another for the sake of demonstrating the superiority of their own method. At times, each approach has overlapped with the others. Nonetheless, there are some generally understood terms which can be used in a meaningful way to understand each of them as distinct approaches. We will elaborate on four individual systems: classical apologetics, evidentialism, experiential apologetics, and presuppositionalism.

Classical apologetics is a step-by-step method of defending Catholicism. This tradition is prominent among Catholic thinkers and reaches back to the early Church Fathers.¹²³ Following Augustine, Anselm, and Thomas Aquinas, classical apologists

¹²² For discussion on the various apologetic systems, see Avery Dulles, *A History of Apologetics*, rev. and exp. ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005); Gordon R. Lewis: *Testing Christianity's Truth Claims: Approaches to Christian Apologetics* (Chicago: Moody, 1976); Stephen Cowan, (ed.), *Five Views on Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000); Bernard Ramm, *Varieties of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1961).

¹²³ Avery Dulles, *A History of Apologetics*, 359.

maintain that each step builds and presupposes more general preconditions necessary for the rational possibility of faith. A classical apologist establishes the existence of God before they present evidence for the deity of Christ. For them, it would not make sense to argue for the Son of God unless there is a God who can have a Son who can institute a certain kind of Church.

They claim that God's existence can be proven apart from the influence of faith. The next step in this method is to show that miracles are possible. After demonstrating the *likelihood* of miracles, the New Testament writings are then shown to be fundamentally historically trustworthy. From the time of the Reformation Catholic apologists then strenuously argued that the Catholic Church is the Church which best fits the four ecclesial attributes of the Church as expressed in the ancient creeds. This final step was used to demonstrate that Protestants could not be the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church because none of them could sufficiently characterize the four marks.

One of the indispensable strengths of classical apologetics is the focus on common ground between believers and unbelievers. Hence it reaffirms the universal importance of natural theology and the importance of reason. Post-conciliar advocates might include Peter Kreeft, Ronald Tacelli, Benedict Ashley, Robert Spitzer, Brian Davies, and John E. Wippel.¹²⁴ Richard Swinburne epitomizes the best work in

¹²⁴ Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli, *Handbook of Catholic Apologetics: Reasoned Answers to Questions of Faith* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2009); Benedict M. Ashley, *Choosing a World-View and Value System: An Ecumenical Apologetics* (New York: Alba House, 2000); Robert Spitzer, *New Proofs for the Existence of God: Contributions of Contemporary Physics and Philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010); John E. Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 2000); Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1993).

contemporary classical apologetics in the postconciliar era.¹²⁵ Protestants such as William Lane Craig, Norman Geisler, R.C. Sproul, and J.P. Moreland have also appealed to this method in their published works.¹²⁶

One of the pitfalls of classical apologetics is that it does not necessarily make Christianity applicable to real life scenarios. Truth is not always a guarantee of relevance. However, Christianity is not merely about what happened two thousand years ago in the person of Christ; it is also about what God is doing today in salvation history. Thus the classical method seems like an impersonal method of Catholic defense. The facticity of Christianity is not automatically connected to the value of Christian faith to persons living in the here and now. This shortcoming is precisely one of the reasons why it has been so sharply criticized in recent years. Second, its emphasis on the mind makes it unattractive to many people. Fundamentally, classical apologists rely on *reason* to defend the claims of Christ. Most people are not convinced to believe in Christianity because of reasoned arguments. Thirdly, it has a difficult time exposing the fallacies of other perspectives. Instead, classical apologists merely seek to overwhelm other secular and religious claims by providing positive arguments in Christianity's favor. Thus it is generally lacking in the ability to expose fallacious views in other positions except by default (or, indirectly).

Other apologists have challenged the overly propositional understanding of theology that classical apologists have relied on (e.g., Søren Kierkegaard, Rudolph

¹²⁵ Richard Swinburne, *Is There a God?*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University, 2010); idem, *Was Jesus God?* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2009); idem, *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2003).

¹²⁶ William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008); J.P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City: A Defense of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1987); Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1988); R.C. Sproul, John H. Gerstner, and Arthur W. Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics: A Rational Defense of the Christian Faith and a Critique of Presuppositional Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984).

Bultmann, and Karl Barth). For them, classical apologists do not adequately regard the mysteries of faith as paradoxical, going beyond the propositional mode of understanding. An incomprehensible God simply cannot be put into a box and defended with reasoned arguments. God is a mystery capable of being apprehended, but he could never be comprehended. Seen in this way, God can be known, but is also forever unknown. Unfortunately many classical apologists overlook this crucial distinction, and turn the notion of Catholic defense into a matter of winning a debate.

There is long and reputable tradition of *evidential apologetics* in the Church. Instead of stressing *reason*, evidentialists would rather use *facts*. In this view of apologetics there is no specific procedure as in the classical apologetics; there is no logically prior and necessary step before one proceeds to the other pre-conditions for faith. For evidentialists, anyone can perceive that Christianity is true if they simply look at the relevant evidence with an open mind. The evidentialist stresses the need to establish scientific, archaeological, sociological, psychological, historical, and even experiential evidence in any combination of ways that might be profitable in the case for faith. Evidence is one of many strands in the overall web of argument. One of the strengths of this method over classical apologetics is that it can use negative evidence to refute (or make less probable) the claims of other worldviews. It overlaps with classical apologetics by using evidence, but it tends to overlook the classicalist's use of the prior philosophical framework.

Instead of speaking in terms of proof or demonstration, evidentialists often propose cumulative case and/or inductive arguments.¹²⁷ This realistic perspective is one

¹²⁷ Basil Mitchell, *The Justification of Religious Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1981); William J. Abraham, "Cumulative Case Arguments for Christian Theism," in William J. Abraham and

of the strengths of evidentialism. Most of the time arguments are counted as probabilistic, not conclusive. In contrast to experientialism, evidentialists stress the importance of using facts. Noted evidentialist approaches are offered by the scientist-theologians Arthur Peacocke, Ian Barbour, John Polkinghorne, John Haught and Kenneth R. Miller.¹²⁸ Wolfhart Pannenberg, N.T. Wright and John Warwick Montgomery are contemporary representatives of *historical* evidentialists.¹²⁹

Like classical apologetics, evidentialism suffers some crucial setbacks. First, it cannot make Christianity true for any *person*. It cannot show that Christianity is true for *today*. Second, most people are suspicious of evidences for faith. Furthermore, evidentialists presume that unbelievers are interested and willing to examine the evidence for Christ. Moreover, the use of hard evidence (from, say, science or history) is not exactly the warmest way to win over the hearts of many people.

Classical apologists quickly point out against the evidentialist that there is no such thing as bare facts to be assessed. As Norman Geisler states: “facts and events have ultimate meaning only within and by virtue of the context of the world view in which

Stephen W. Holtzer (eds.), *The Rationality of Religious Belief: Essay in Honor of Basil Mitchell* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1987); Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 2d. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University, 2004); idem *Faith and Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2004).

¹²⁸ Arthur Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age: Being and Becoming—Natural, Divine*, enl. sub. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993); John Polkinghorne, *Belief in God in an Age of Science* (New Haven: Yale University, 2003); John F. Haught, *Science and Religion: From Conflict to Conversation* (Mahwah: Paulist, 1995); idem, *Is Nature Enough?: Meaning and Truth in the Age of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2006); Kenneth R. Miller, *Finding Darwin's God: A Scientist's Search for Common Ground Between God and Evolution* (New York: Harper, 2007); Ian Barbour, *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, rev. sub. ed. (New York: HarperOne, 1997).

¹²⁹ Wolfhart Pannenberg, “Dogmatic Theses on the Doctrine of Revelation,” in Wolfhart Pannenberg, trans. David Granskou, *Revelation as History* (London: Macmillan, 1968), pp. 123-158; idem, *Jesus—God and Man*, trans. L.L. Wilkens and D.A. Priebe (London: SCM, 1968); N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003); John Warwick Montgomery, *Faith Founded on Fact: Essays in Evidential Apologetics* (Canadian Institute for Law, Theology & Public Policy, Inc. October 1978), idem, *History and Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Bethany House, 1987).

they are conceived.”¹³⁰ He adds: “evidence gains its meaning only by its immediate and overall context; and evidence as such cannot, without begging the question, be used to establish the overall context by which it obtains its very meaning as evidence. . . . it is a vicious circle to argue that a given fact (say, the resuscitation of Christ’s body) is evidence of a certain truth claim (say, Christ’s claim to be God), unless it can be established that the event comes in the context of a theistic universe.”¹³¹

Thus meaning is always derived from within an interpretive context. Other apologists representing other defense systems rightly insist that Christian evidentialists must assume a theistic worldview as they provide the data in support of Christian faith.¹³² One simply cannot argue from the data unless there is an implicit philosophical framework already in place. As Sproul, Lindsey, and Gerstner explain: “Miracles cannot prove God. God, as a matter of fact, alone can prove miracles. That is, only on the prior evidence that God exists is a miracle even possible.”¹³³

Experientialists appeal to human experiences of God and the Christian community. Unlike classical apologetics and evidentialism, this apologetic system is practical and more personally oriented. The experientialist is acutely aware that the problems which prevent individuals from embracing the Gospel are often deep and psychological, not just intellectual. Apologists must confront these issues and address them as well. Thus, one salient aspect to experientialism is an emphasis on human

¹³⁰ Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, 85

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹³² W. Stanford Reid, “Subjectivity or Objectivity,” in E.R. Geehan (ed.), *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Philosophy and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1993), 409. Cf. Mark M. Hanna, *Crucial Questions in Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 100; Carl Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, 6 vol. (Waco: Word Press, 1976-1983), 1:231.

¹³³ Sproul, Gerstner, and Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics*, 146.

holiness and the development of the entire person. One of the strengths of experientialism is that it takes the limits of reason seriously.

Experiential approaches are numerous in contemporary Catholicism and *generally* follow the line of thought in John Henry Newman and Maurice Blondel.¹³⁴ Postconciliar Catholic experientialists might include René Latourelle and Hans Urs Van Balthasar.¹³⁵ Although these apologists should *not* be considered experientialists in the strict sense of the word, they certainly do stress the importance of human experience over rational approaches to Catholic defense. The strength of experientialism lies in its popular appeal and is the most common means by which most people come to faith (it is also the most pronounced apologetic model of the Council). Unlike the intellectualism of classical apologetics and evidentialism, the stress is on the heart and lived experience within the community of believers.

Other experientialists testify to the way in which God has worked in their life to persuade either themselves or outsiders unto faith. Existential experiences are also reported as unmediated, self-authenticating experiences of God, and they vindicate Christianity to those who have them. Some experiential apologists literally depreciate the use of rational argument for apologetic purposes; they often scorn evidentialist and/or

¹³⁴ John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1992); Maurice Blondel, *Action (1893): Essay on a Critique of Life and a Science of Practice* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1984); idem, *The Letter on Apologetics and History and Dogma*, trans. Alexander Dru and Illyd Trethowan (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

¹³⁵ René Latourelle, *Christ and the Church: Signs of Salvation*, trans. Sr. Dominic Parker (New York: Alba House, 1972); idem, *Theology of Revelation* (New York: Alba House, 1966); Hans Urs Van Balthasar, *Love Alone is Credible* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005). For other experiential approaches, see Richard Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty and Art* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1999); idem, *Theology and the Arts: Encountering God Through Music, Art, and Rhetoric* (Mahwah: Paulist, 2000); John Seward, *The Beauty of Holiness and the Holiness of Beauty: Art, Sanctity, and the Truth of Catholicism* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1997); Thomas Dubay, *The Evidential Power of Beauty: Science and Theology Meet* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1999); Victoria S. Harrison, *The Apologetic Value of Human Holiness: Von Balthasar's Christocentric Philosophical Anthropology* (New York: Springer, 2000).

classical apologetics. These experientialists include Søren Kierkegaard, Rudolph Bultmann, and Karl Barth. Experiential arguments can certainly be used by evidentialists, but the experientialist wants to use experiential arguments alone. The experiential apologist is not as concerned with building a systematic, gradual case as in classical apologetics as much as they want to persuade others by speaking with them about their experiences.

For all of this method's strengths, it is necessarily shortsighted in many respects (and possibly harmful in others). In and of itself, experientialism downplays the use of objective evidence and the propositional mode of understanding. Though propositional knowledge may be a poor substitute for knowledge of God, it can still serve as a means to foster a personal relationship with God and others. Without the use of propositional understanding, one could never adequately interpret their experience. Hence, in the absence of hard evidences, experientialism (construed as an apologetic method that denies the validity of the other apologetic models) remains an inadequate model of apologetics. Experiences are never self-authenticating, and they must be interpreted through some other philosophical means.

Experiences are often unverifiable and must be taken on faith alone by outsiders. In this way, the hardheaded skeptic is unlikely to be persuaded by hearing the testimony of believers and how they came to believe in Christianity. Many skeptics will quickly dismiss the warm experience of the Church by dismissing them with naturalistic explanations. Lastly, radical proponents of experientialism often overlook the primary sources of Christian theology (e.g., Scripture and Tradition) for the sake of their unique experiences.

Protestants who are sympathetic to apologetics tend to embrace some form of experientialism or are *presuppositional apologists* (or, as described in this dissertation, theological apologists). Some theological presuppositionalists include Gordon Clark, Carl Henry, and Cornelius Van Til.¹³⁶ In this view one must begin with the *presupposition* of Scripture and the Church's teachings to expose the errors of Christianity's critics. The assumption is that life, the universe, language, and history cannot make sense apart from the *assumed postulate* of Christianity. Christian faith therefore demonstrates itself to be true because it is the only world and life view that is coherent and livable. It is the only religion which embraces and incorporates the truth of revelation which broadens and intensifies our understanding of humanity and the world. These apologists argue *transcendentally* by showing that all meaning and human thought presupposes the truth of Christian faith. As one theological presuppositionalist puts it: "[We] should present the biblical God, not merely as the conclusion to an argument, but as the one who makes argument possible."¹³⁷

All the known facts must be taken into account when comparing and contrasting worldviews. Since Christianity is true from the start in this view, theological presuppositionalists hope to find contradictions in other competing views. And in so doing, they want to show the superiority of Catholicism by default. One of the strengths of theological apologetics is the recognition that we must begin with presuppositions. There is certainly no such thing as a view from nowhere. Some advocates of this method

¹³⁶ Carl F. H. Henry, *Remaking the Modern Mind* (Joplin: College Press, 1946); idem, *Giving a Reason for our Hope* (New York: W.A. Wilde, 1949); Gordon H. Clark and John W. Robbins, *Religion, Reason, and Revelation*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Trinity Foundation, 1995); Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2003) idem, *The Defense of the Faith*, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2008).

¹³⁷ John M. Frame, "Presuppositional Apologetics," in Stephen Cowan, (ed.), *Five Views on Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 220.

have no problem including livability as one of the criteria for determining truth claims. This point nicely coalesces with experiential approaches.

Presuppositionalists often clash with advocates of classical apologetics, evidentialism, and experientialism. Undoubtedly this has to do with the doctrine of total depravity which its advocates often endorse. They accuse traditional rhetoricians for being too confident of what reason can demonstrate apart from the influence of divine revelation. Thus presuppositionalists are a certain type of fideist and are sometimes unafraid to be labeled as such. While some Catholics might think this makes presuppositionalism incompatible with Catholic theology, it can be utilized if understood in a certain way. As Avery Dulles rightly observed: “. . . something analogous to this method may be found among Catholics who follow Augustine and Anselm, speaking of ‘faith seeking understanding’. Many recent and contemporary Catholic apologists take over from Roussetot the idea that the credibility of the Christian religion, which apologetics seeks to demonstrate, can be seen only from within the posture of faith. . . . Vatican II seems to endorse this style of argument.”¹³⁸

Unlike classical apologetics, which is often framed in terms of positive argument, presuppositionalists are limited to refuting attacks and exposing errors within these criticisms. Therefore, it can only show what is false, not what is true. The idea that Christianity is true by default does not seem like a convincing apologetic to those willing to think through the logic of this position. As one critic of this method remarks: “As commonly understood, presuppositionalism is guilty of a logical howler; it commits the

¹³⁸ Avery Dulles, *A History of Apologetics*, 362.

informal fallacy of *petitio principii*, or begging the question, for it advocates presupposing the truth of Christian theism in order to prove Christian theism.”¹³⁹

What is more, it is difficult to know whether the dialogue partners have all the necessary data in order to make a proper assessment between worldviews. How could one ever know whether they have all the needed evidence to make an adequate assessment? Theological presuppositionalists seems to stymie intelligible discourse since it is presupposed that there is no common ground between its proponents and unbelievers. Advocates of rational apologetics supplement the use of presuppositionalism because it can provide common points of reference with those who do not share Catholic beliefs.¹⁴⁰

In conclusion, we have seen that proponents of one method of apologetics can provide legitimate critiques of the others. Perhaps a combinatorial approach might be a good candidate to replace these often isolated methods. Vatican II endorses the distinctive elements of each model. This strongly suggests that each model is inadequate and that a holistic approach to Catholic defense should be welcomed. Stephen Bevans and Jeffrey Gross recommend that “Scholars of the Second Vatican Council point out that it is not enough simply to consult any of its texts that deal directly with a specific theme—e.g., church, revelation, liturgy—in order to understand how that theme was developed by the council. Rather, they say, one needs to see how an individual theme is expressed throughout all sixteen council documents. This is *particularly* true in terms of

¹³⁹ William Lane Craig, “A Classical Apologist’s Response,” in Stephen Cowan, (ed.), *Five Views on Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 232.

¹⁴⁰ Cf. John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, 4. Cf. Vatican Council II, *Optatum Totius*, 15.

... 'evangelization' or 'mission' ... because in many ways it is a theme that is at the heart of what the council was about."¹⁴¹

¹⁴¹ Stephen Bevens and Jeffrey Gross, *Evangelization and Religious Freedom: Ad Gentes, Dignitatis Humanae* (New York: Paulist, 2009), 3.

DOES POSTMODERN RELATIVISM DEFEAT APOLOGETICS?

The traditional conception of truth as an absolute, objective, and universal description of reality has undergone a radical reinterpretation in the West. Truth is no longer seen as a goal that all persons are obligated to know and pursue as an end in and of itself, but is rather understood as something completely inseparable from politics, culture, psychology, biology, race, and gender. In this postmodern view of truth, reality is determined by individuals, not discovered by them. As Richard Rorty puts it: “Truth is made rather than found.”¹⁴² Although it is difficult to define postmodernism, the movement is usually characterized by (1) the affirmation of radical and irreducible pluralism; (2) the rejection of unifying metaphysical or religious claims; and (3) suspicion toward binary categories that characterizes different regions of thought or ontological realities.¹⁴³

Negatively speaking, postmodernism is sometimes considered a type of relativism. In this understanding of postmodernism, all metaphysical truths, including linguistic meaning, moral values, and human nature no longer have a stable meaning. I will discuss some representative postmodern relativistic views in this chapter. Since there is no overarching story to guide individuals with this type of relativism in the background, some strands of postmodernism is also characterized, in the words of Jean François Lyotard, by “incredulity toward meta-narratives.”¹⁴⁴ The most radical understandings of pluralism makes it difficult to have a unified view of the world under

¹⁴² Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1989). This quotation is a paraphrase of one of Rorty’s central points in chapter 1. See especially page 7.

¹⁴³ Jean François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1979).

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, xxiv.

the banner of Catholic Christianity. Some Catholic theologians seem to have absorbed this same understanding of truth in their reflections on divine revelation. As Avery Dulles seems to suggest: “Theology, for its part, all too often evades the challenge of truth. Falling into fideism or sheer positivism, many theologians limit themselves to sociological, linguistic, and historical studies of the Bible and Church teaching.”¹⁴⁵

As a result of the paradigmatic shift from modernism to postmodernism, the unifying claims of the Church can no longer be seen as true and thus binding on persons. So, what is sorely needed in the post-conciliar apologetics literature is a robust response to some of the extreme views of postmodern relativism and its impact on retrieving the discipline of apologetics. A response to the relativistic mentality of postmodernism will also help theologians to reformulate arguments that may be more effective.

Many apologists simply evade the question of truth, settling for other transcendental means of persuasion such as moral goodness. Other apologists simply resort to arguments that assume that truth is correspondence with reality. Hence, in this chapter I will address the challenge of anti-realism, showing its incoherence in order to argue for the importance of a rational or reasonable apologetics. For it would not make sense for apologists to make arguments and present evidence for the faith unless the doctrinal positions they at least think are provable or “more probable than not” are construed as legitimate claims to truth in the first place.

The Demise of Truth

¹⁴⁵ Avery Dulles, “Can Philosophy Be Christian?: The New State of the Question,” in *The Two Wings of Catholic Thought: Essays on Fides et Ratio*, ed. David Ruel Foster and Joseph W. Koterski (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 2003), 19.

Professor Allan Bloom is no stranger to our current cultural malaise. Surveying the landscape of higher education in the 1980s, Bloom wrote that

There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative. If this belief is put to the test, one can count on the students' reaction: they will be uncomprehending. . . . The danger they have been taught to fear from absolutism is not error but intolerance. Relativism is necessary to openness; and this is the virtue, the only virtue, which all primary education for more than fifty years has dedicated itself to inculcating. Openness—and the relativism that makes it the only plausible stance in the face of various claims to truth and various ways of life and kinds of human beings—is the great insight of our times. . . . The study of history and of culture teaches that all the world was made in the past; men always thought they were right, and that led to wars, persecutions, slavery, xenophobia, racism, and chauvinism. The point is not to correct the mistakes and really be right; rather it is not to think you are right at all.¹⁴⁶

Bloom's book has lost hardly any of its relevance in today's cultural milieu. The decline of truth is not only occurring in the academy, it is found everywhere in popular culture. The denial of objective truth is usually assumed rather than argued for by the ordinary person. Cheap slogans such as "true for you, but not for me!" run rampant in certain quarters of postmodernity.

Like most revolutions in human thinking, the emergence of postmodernism did not creep into Western culture overnight, but can be traced back to the fact/value split of Enlightenment philosophers such as Immanuel Kant (1724-1804).¹⁴⁷ He combined complete skepticism about metaphysical knowledge along with an overly optimistic outlook which held that universal, necessary (*a priori*) knowledge of the conditions of experience was possible. This severance of fact from meaning made it easier for persons to be leery of truth claims, especially metaphysical claims. Whether these claims are pronounced in the name of religion or not, however, objective truths are generally relegated with suspicion and are interpreted as expressions of subjective preference. As John Caputo writes: "Each thing has its own drive or local force—its 'perspective'—and

¹⁴⁶ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 25, 26.

¹⁴⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*.

the world is a multiplicity of competing perspectives. Ideas have not ‘truth’ but ‘value,’ that is, an effectiveness that is measured by their capacity to enhance life.”¹⁴⁸

The Kantian divorce of fact and meaning eventually culminated in the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900),¹⁴⁹ a forerunner and prophet of postmodernism. In his words: “What then is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms—in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people; truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their picture and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins.”¹⁵⁰ Indeed, for Nietzsche, “There are no facts, only interpretations.”¹⁵¹ In reference to Nietzsche’s denial of universals, Michel Foucault explains the origins of Nietzsche’s idea: “Why does Nietzsche challenge the pursuit of the origin (*Ursprung*) . . . ? First, because it is an attempt to capture the exact essence of things, . . . because this search assumes the existence of immobile forms that precede the eternal world of accident and succession. . . . However, . . . there is ‘something altogether different’ behind things: not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that *they have no*

¹⁴⁸ John D. Caputo, “Atheism, A/Theology, and the Postmodern Condition,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, ed. Michael Martin (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2006), 270, 271.

¹⁴⁹ For more on this development, see Colin Gunton, *Enlightenment and Alienation* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2000).

¹⁵⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, “Truth and the Extra Moral Sense,” in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking, 1968), 46, 47.

¹⁵¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1968), 267.

essence” (emphasis mine).¹⁵² For Nietzsche, the universal naming of objects does not arise out of recognizing actual essences in reality.

As an extension of Kant’s distinction between the noumenal and the phenomenal worlds, Foucault then maintained that human judgments about the world are first filtered through psychological, cultural and historical contingencies, leaving little room for metaphysics.¹⁵³ Thus it becomes impossible to achieve knowledge of the world as it is. In reference to the idea that persons must refer to human nature in order to make ethical judgments (i.e., natural law morality), for example, Richard Rorty claims: “there is nothing deep down inside us except what we have put there ourselves, no criterion that we have not created in the course of creating a practice, no standard of rationality that is not an appeal to such a criterion, no rigorous argumentation that is not obedience to our own conventions.”¹⁵⁴

The postmodern rejection of universals also has an impact on the possibility of interpersonal communication. Because words do not have corresponding referents, language loses its power to make definitive statements and is no longer capable of persuading others. Written texts no longer refer to reality when metaphysical truths (such as human nature) are illusory.¹⁵⁵ Some thinkers such as Ferdinand de Saussure and Roman Jakobson claim that texts must be released from an objective message that readers can somehow discover for themselves. Here, every text can be shown to be ambiguous.

¹⁵² Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Articles*, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1977), 142.

¹⁵³ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1989), 3-6.

¹⁵⁴ Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1982), xlii.

¹⁵⁵ Richard Rorty, introduction to John P. Murphy’s *Pragmatism: From Pierce to Davidson* (Boulder: Westview, 1990).

The original meaning the author placed in her or his writing does not limit the reader's understanding of what is written. Therefore, every reader imposes their own meaning onto the text. In Jacques Derrida's words: "Those who wish to ground solidarity in objectivity . . . have to construe truth as correspondence to reality. . . . By contrast, those who wish to reduce objectivity to solidarity . . . view truth as, in William James' phrase, what is good for us to believe. So they do not need an account of a relation between beliefs and objects called 'correspondence'."¹⁵⁶

The second principal way that postmodernists have attacked the nature and knowability of truth is derived from yet another angle of Nietzsche's philosophy. Truth is not correspondence with reality, but is reduced to the function of power relationships.¹⁵⁷ By suppressing the weak in society, the powerful exert their voice over the weak to guarantee that their voice will be heard to influence the world. In this perspective, truth is seen as that which favors the powerful. As Foucault once said: "I think that, instead of trying to find out what truth, as opposed to error, it might be more interesting to take up the program posed by Nietzsche: how is it that, in our societies, "the truth" has been given this value, thus placing us absolutely under its thrall."¹⁵⁸

One of the *negative* impacts of postmodernism is that human understanding is so conditioned by historical and cultural contingencies that it becomes impossible of knowing objective truths. Not all postmodern philosophies are hostile to Christian truth claims. Other postmodernists contend that truth is the product of the human drive for

¹⁵⁶ Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity?," in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (New York: Cambridge University, 1991), 22.

¹⁵⁷ Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *Power/Knowledge*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 133; idem, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 27, 28.

¹⁵⁸ Michel Foucault, "Strategies of Power," *The Truth About Truth: De-confusing and Reconstructing the Postmodern World*, ed. Walter Truett Anderson (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1995), 45.

power, not reality as such. No matter which conception is proffered, both of them are relevant for Catholics because it undermines the idea that Christianity is true for everyone, independently of anyone's belief in it. And if Christianity is not true, then why should believers seek to evangelize others (and not proselytize!) to believe in it? The denial of objective truth therefore undercuts the impetus for participating in the Great Commission. What means of persuasion could be given if Christianity is merely one of many opinions in the marketplace of ideas? Of course, the negative side to postmodernism militates against rational apologetics, whose practitioners firmly believe that the principal reason why anyone should believe in Christianity is because it is true for everyone.

Postmodern Relativism and the Need for Apologetics

Traditionally Catholic apologists assumed that truth is objective, exclusive, and absolute. The knowability of objective truth was not a concern for them. Rather, they began with establishing God's existence, the human need for God, and then they argued for the historical credibility for Jesus' divinity. All of this culminated in an assessment of which Church best fits the four attributes of the Church (i.e., one, holy, catholic, and apostolic).¹⁵⁹ This step-by-step method made good sense, for it did not seem reasonable for doubters of the faith to believe that Jesus is the Son of God unless there is a God who can have a Son who can institute a certain type of Church.

¹⁵⁹ See, e.g., Michael Sheehan, *Apologetics and Catholic Doctrine* (Dublin: Gill and Son, 1959); Walter Devivier, *Christian Apologetics: A Defense of Catholic Faith*, 2 vols. (New York: Joseph Wagner, 1924); Anthony Alexander, *College Apologetics: Proofs for the Truth of the Catholic Faith* (Rockford, IL: Tan, 2008); Joseph Cavanaugh, *Evidence for Our Faith* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1959); Paul J. Glenn, *Apologetics: A Class Manual in the Philosophy of the Catholic Religion* (New York: B. Herder, 1932); Thomas Joseph Walshe, *The Principles of Catholic Apologetics* (New York: B. Herder, 1926).

Older apologetical methods were often accompanied by a faulty epistemological outlook (Enlightenment rationalism), the situation in apologetic methodology must change today. For the burning issue today is whether anything is objectively true, let alone that it can be known as such. According to Pope Benedict XVI: “Relativism has thus become the central problem for the faith at the present time. . . . The faith cannot be liberated if reason itself does not open up again. If the door to metaphysical cognition remains closed, if the limits of human knowledge set by Kant are impassable, faith is destined to atrophy: It simply lacks air to breathe.”¹⁶⁰ A refurbished method of classical apologetics must not only evade the older epistemological error commonly known as “evidentialism,” it must also begin with the nature of truth, for apologetical arguments and other related evidence assumes the knowability of first principles.

While many forms of postconciliar apologetics have appealed to beauty or goodness as a means of persuasion,¹⁶¹ these should not become an exclusive means for the apologist. Emphasizing truth without beauty and goodness can lead to dogmatism (which was part of the problem with pre-conciliar classical apologetics). An approach that appeals to beauty at the expense of the other transcendentals can lead to hedonism. And goodness without truth and beauty can lead to legalism. Thus, what is sorely needed

¹⁶⁰ Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), “Relativism: The Central Problem for Faith Today,” *Origins*, 26.20 (October 31, 1996): 316.

¹⁶¹ Richard Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty and Art* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1999); idem, *Theology and the Arts: Encountering God Through Music, Art, and Rhetoric* (Mahwah: Paulist, 2000); John Saward, *The Beauty of Holiness and the Holiness of Beauty: Art, Sanctity, and the Truth of Catholicism* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 1997); Thomas Dubay, *The Evidential Power of Beauty: Science and Theology Meet* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 1999); Victoria S. Harrison, *The Apologetic Value of Human Holiness: Von Balthasar's Christocentric Philosophical Anthropology* (New York: Springer, 2000).

is an emphasis that provides evidence which leads to *all* the transcendentals, not one over the others. For all the transcendentals are formal descriptions of God himself.¹⁶²

Other approaches can and must complement the rational approach. In reaction to neo-scholasticism, then, which was heavily concerned with the *truth* of Christian faith, theologians must now emphasize the beauty, goodness, truth, and relationality of the Godhead. When individuals stress truth at the expense of other transcendentals, then this can lead persons down the path of rationalism which can make one combative, triumphalistic, and, in the worst case scenario, atheistic. But then again, this should not become an excuse to give up on truth. As one noteworthy commentator states: “although Aquinas says that the Five Ways are arguments for the existence of God, they are not intended as an exhaustive defense of belief in God’s existence.”¹⁶³

Because the surrounding context must be taken into consideration when doing apologetics,¹⁶⁴ some occasions are simply not conducive to engaging in rational apologetics, (which relies on the mind and the proper use of evidence). But when the opportunity arises for such an interaction, the first place to begin might be with the nature and knowability of truth, especially if one’s dialogue partner is skeptical of objective truth in the first place. The success of the evidence for Jesus of Nazareth and the positive influence that Christianity has had upon the world all depend on the logical precondition of God’s existence. The arguments for God’s existence all depend on first principles such as the law of non-contradiction, the law of identity, and the law of the excluded

¹⁶² Robert J. Spitzer, *New Proofs for the Existence of God: Contributions of Contemporary Physics and Philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 239-286.

¹⁶³ Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1992), 26.

¹⁶⁴ *Gaudium et Spes*, 4, 10, 11, 12, 41, 62 ; *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 6, 13, 25, 27; *Ad Gentes*, 10, 20, 21; *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 10, 17 ; *Perfectae Caritatis*, 20, *Christus Dominus*, 13.

middle.¹⁶⁵ And it is precisely the first principles of knowledge that postmodern relativists argue against.

On the contemporary scene, many Catholic apologetics publications do not touch upon the need for rational apologetics. Undoubtedly one of the best published works in the apologetics literature is René Latourelle's *Christ and the Church: Signs of Salvation*.¹⁶⁶ Latourelle takes great pains to stress the importance of the evidential power of human holiness.

But it must be stressed that *if* one is holy, then they will use *every* means to reach unbelievers, not just ways that exclude the mind and verbal persuasion. Holiness may be *more* than rational, but is certainly not *less* than rational. Conversely, if one uses rational argument, then this can become a means by which one is sanctified. Latourelle paints with beautiful, broad strokes in his otherwise excellent book by emphasizing the importance of holiness without elaborating too much further upon the need for rational apologetics. Of course, rational apologetics is not always needed, and is dependent on the context of the discussion.¹⁶⁷ Therefore correct readings of Vatican II will include the use of rational apologetics, but go beyond it as well.

¹⁶⁵ The following list of first principles might be set forth: (1) Being is (B is); this is known as the principle of existence. (2) Being is being (B is B); this principle can be called the principle of identity. (3) Being is not nonbeing (B is not non-B); the principle of non-contradiction. (4) Either being or nonbeing (B or non-B); the principle of the excluded middle. (5) Nonbeing cannot cause being (non-B < B); (6) the principle of existential causality (B can cause C). For a discussion of first principles, see James Bacon Sullivan, *An Examination of First Principles in Aristotle and Aquinas* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1939); Frederick Wilhelmson, *Man's Knowledge of Reality: An Introduction to Thomistic Epistemology* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1956); Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *God: His Existence and Nature*, 2 vols. (St. Louis: Herder, 1945); Louis-Marie Regis, *St. Thomas and Epistemology* (Milwaukee: Marquette University, 1946).

¹⁶⁶ René Latourelle, *Christ and the Church: Signs of Salvation*, trans. Sr. Dominic Parker (New York: Alba House, 1972).

¹⁶⁷ For more on this, see Paul Giffiths, *An Apology for Apologetics: A Study in the Logic of Interreligious Dialogue* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1991), 77-84.

Theologians such as Hans Urs Van Balthasar contend that *love* must serve as the primary means of apologetic persuasion.¹⁶⁸ As in the case with Latourelle, there is something right about this contention. But, *if* one loves, *then* appeal can and should be made to reason (especially if the context and/or dialogue allows for it). Like the other transcendentals, an apologetics of love simply cannot replace the enterprise of rational apologetics. Love includes the use of verbal discussion and argument when the circumstances allow for it.

Of course, not every published work in the post-conciliar era has appealed to beauty or goodness. Every so often a good work of Catholic rational apologetics can be found.¹⁶⁹ Benedict Ashley's *Choosing a World-View and Value System: An Ecumenical Apologetics*¹⁷⁰ is one of the few published works in the mainstream which is unafraid to engage central issues of credibility with reason and hard evidence. Like these other works in rational apologetics (e.g., works by Hugo Meynell, John Martinelli and Richard Purtill), Ashley successfully avoids the pitfalls of Enlightenment rationalism, comparing and contrasting different conceptions of deity. Unfortunately, however, there is no engagement with first principles which make the project of natural theology and the *demonstratio christiana* coherent and thus reasonable to engage in. Correlatively, there is no substantial engagement with postmodern relativism in these works. Undoubtedly one of the main reasons why individuals under the influence of postmodernism will resist

¹⁶⁸ Hans Urs Van Balthasar, *Love Alone is Credible* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005).

¹⁶⁹ Other post-conciliar works in rational apologetics include Hugo A. Meynell, *God and the World* (London: SPCK, 1971); idem, *Is Christianity True?* (Washington, D.C: Catholic University of America, 1994); John Martinelli, *Reasons to Believe Today* (Milwaukee: Marquette University, 1996); Richard R. Purtill, *Reason to Believe: Why Faith Makes Sense* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2009).

¹⁷⁰ Benedict Ashley, *Choosing a World-View and Value System: An Ecumenical Apologetics* (New York: Alba House, 2000).

these books is that there is no such thing as objective truth, let alone that it could be known as such.

Perhaps a more dominant tradition of rational apologetics after Vatican II has come from the school of Thomism known as the “Transcendental Thomists.”¹⁷¹ Even so, neither do these theologians see an urgent need to explicate and defend the nature and knowability of truth for the purposes of reinvigorating the discipline of apologetics. A great reference work is the *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, which has dozens of very fine articles on issues of credibility.¹⁷² Yet hardly any of the contributors discuss the postmodern critique and the ramifications this has on Catholic apologetics and/or evangelization. Avery Dulles’ standard work on the history of apologetics barely mentions the influence of rational apologetics in Catholic circles after Vatican II.¹⁷³ Though he commends a handful of lay apologists for their enthusiasm in using evidence for faith, Catholic scholars working in the mainstream have yet to make their presence felt.

Because the primary lens through which many individuals interpret the world is relativistic, apologists can and should begin with truth. Still many theologians resist anything that resembles a reasoned defense of the faith, claiming that it smacks of modernism where the canons of reason are upheld at the expense of other forms of knowing. But I believe this is a serious misreading of Enlightenment rationalism and its relationship to rational apologetics. To this we must now turn.

¹⁷¹ Richard Viladesau, *The Reason for Our Hope: A Theological Anthropology* (New York: Paulist, 1984); idem, *Answering for Faith: Christ and the Human Search for Salvation* (New York: Paulist, 1987)

¹⁷² René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, ed., *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 2000). At most there are three articles in this volume which briefly allude to the topic addressed in this chapter of the dissertation.

¹⁷³ Avery Dulles, *A History of Apologetics*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005).

Rational Apologetics and Enlightenment Rationalism

Cartesian foundationalism (which emanates from the philosophy of René Descartes, 1596-1650) is an epistemological outlook which insists that unless knowledge is self-evident or incorrigible, one does not have true knowledge. As a reaction to modernism, postmodernists have dealt a heavy blow to Descartes' version of foundationalism. The latter is self-refuting. As a result, his epistemological theory has been almost universally rejected by philosophers.

But this does not mean *all* foundationalisms are incoherent. While the postmodern critique has been widely accepted, it does not successfully apply to modified versions of foundationalism which have been gaining in momentum since the mid-1970's. These versions are more modest, making it difficult for the postmodernist critique to succeed. As philosopher Tim Triplett recognizes: "It is not clear that the standard arguments against foundationalism will work against these newer, more modest theories. Indeed, these theories were by and large designed with the purpose of overcoming standard objections."¹⁷⁴ Indeed, without some version of foundationalism, the common ground that is needed for effective communication would be lost. As Pope John Paul II declared:

Although times change and knowledge increases, it is possible to discern a core of philosophical insight within the history of thought as a whole. Consider, for example, the principles of non-contradiction, finality and causality, as well as the concept of the person as a free and intelligent subject, with the capacity to know God, truth and goodness. Consider as well certain fundamental moral norms which are shared by all. These are among the indications that, beyond different schools of thought, there exists a body of knowledge which may be judged a kind of spiritual heritage of humanity. It is as if we had come upon an *implicit philosophy*, as a result of which all feel that they possess these principles, albeit in a general and unreflective way. Precisely because it is shared in some

¹⁷⁴ Tim Triplett, "Recent Work on Foundationalism," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 27, 2 (1990): 93.

measure by all, this knowledge should serve as a kind of reference-point for the different philosophical schools. Once reason successfully intuits and formulates the first universal principles of being and correctly draws from them conclusions which are coherent both logically and ethically, then it may be called right reason or, as the ancients called it, *orthós logos, recta ratio*.¹⁷⁵

Like Cartesian foundationalism, the Pope maintains that some principles are universally applicable to human knowers and are inherent to reality itself. Otherwise, nothing could be known by anyone at any time or place. First principles are either undeniable or are reducible to the undeniable.¹⁷⁶ According to philosophical proponents of foundationalism, nothing at all could be known with first principles. Unlike Cartesian foundationalism, however, epistemological foundations in the modified version are necessary for knowledge, but they are not totally absolute. Let us call this modified version “soft foundationalism,” or “fallibilist foundationalism.” This difference is the first way in which fallibilism differs from classical foundationalism. Thus the kind of foundationalism that is necessary for Catholic apologists to understand, articulate and defend does not have to be Cartesian. Rather, a modified version can be defended—one that may be defended from the postmodern critique.

The self-evident principles of foundationalism are true by their very nature.¹⁷⁷ To deny them one must engage in self-stultifying statements. In a sense, then, individuals *must* use them.¹⁷⁸ Consequently, one of the increasingly evident objections to anti-realist views of truth is the problem of auto-referentiality: the incapability of postmodern relativism to apply its own tenets to its own conceptions of truth. According to Catholic

¹⁷⁵ John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, 4. Cf. Vatican Council II, *Optatam Totius*, 15.

¹⁷⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.17.3. ad 2.

¹⁷⁷ The following list of first principles might be set forth: (1) Being is (B is); this is known as the principle of existence. (2) Being is being (B is B); this principle can be called the principle of identity. (3) Being is not nonbeing (B is not non-B); the principle of non-contradiction. (4) Either being or nonbeing (B or non-B); the principle of the excluded middle. (5) Nonbeing cannot cause being (non-B < B); (6) the principle of existential causality (B can cause C).

¹⁷⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1-2,10, 2.

philosophies which endorse soft versions of foundationalism, first principles are intrinsic to the nature of God (the first universal) and each person, all of which have been created in the image of God (second universal). Other modes of understanding (ones that are not on the same foundational level as first principles) are not known with logical certainty, but are still held with certainty on a more tentative level.

The second principal argument for first principles is that there must be an ultimate basis for truth claims, otherwise there would be an infinite regress of reasons for justifying knowledge (which is impossible).¹⁷⁹ Thirdly, unlike classical foundationalism, the relationship between secondary propositions (i.e., propositions that are known with less certainty than indubitable first principles¹⁸⁰) and indubitable first principles is an inductive one, not a deductive one. Secondary propositions are somehow derived from these other first principles, but they are not derived deductively from them. So the problem with classical foundationalism did not consist in its endorsement of first principles, but in its restrained definition of what could count as a first principle. Soft versions of foundationalism acknowledge that first principles exceed what reason can discover.

In Cartesian foundationalism, knowledge must be reduced to self-evident or incorrigible beliefs. Under fallibilism, human experience (e.g., beliefs related to memory and sense perception), and even faith in the Christian God can count as true knowledge.

¹⁷⁹ John Greco, "Foundationalism and Philosophy of Religion," in *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide to the Subject*, ed. Brian Davies (London: Cassell, 1998), 35. See also Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, trans. John P. Rowan (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1961), 244. See also *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.58.4.

¹⁸⁰ Ralph McInerney, "Analogy and Foundationalism in Thomas Aquinas," in *Rationality, Religious Belief and Moral Commitment: New Essays in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1986), 282.

Within these parameters, modified versions allow for the possibility that persons can err and misinterpret what is at least thought to be true in the process of acquiring knowledge.

Even from the standpoint of faith, then, a type of fallibilism can be practiced. Take the Chalcedonian definition on the two natures of Christ. One can be certain through faith that Christ is true God and true man, but there would still be room for additional exploration and more intense understandings of the incarnation within the parameters officially set by Chalcedon. As Walter Kasper explains, “Revelation is ‘supra-rational,’ not irrational or antirational. It represents the enrichment of reason, not a spurning or constriction of it.”¹⁸¹ For every kataphatic statement of theology, there is a corresponding apophatic element. From the standpoint of the apologist, the evidence and arguments for faith can never be logically certain (though first principles and what they can demonstrate is actually undeniable), but is more probabilistic and thus tentative in nature. Beginning from the “ground up,” apologists begin with first principles; beginning from the “top down,” they seek resonance with what is already believed about revelation.

Some postmodernists present their views not as mere expressions of feeling, but as viewpoints that their readers will comprehend and accept what they have to say. They also hold that their viewpoints are preferable to competing positions, and that there are correct and incorrect interpretations of their positions. As a case in point, Derrida smuggled in a realist conception of truth when he made it evident that one of his detractors misunderstood what he was saying (in a long, ninety-three page article!).¹⁸²

¹⁸¹ Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 271

¹⁸² Jacques Derrida, “Limited, Inc. abs. . .”, in *Glyph* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1977), 2:162-254.

Understanding the shift from classical foundationalism to fallibilism is hugely important for reinstating the use of rational apologetics in a post-conciliar Church. The history of apologetics strongly suggests that when apologists absorb Cartesian foundationalism (and its direct corollary, evidentialism), it becomes easy for atheism to follow shortly thereafter. For it was not until Descartes and Kant that the rational arguments for God’s existence became the foundation upon which theologians sought to show the credibility of Christianity. The upshot of this development was that theologians began to think of religion primarily in terms of reason alone. The effect of their approach was that revelation became relegated to a lower, less important role. Deism flourished, and then atheism followed shortly thereafter.¹⁸³ As Michael Buckley explains: “the strategies of theism or religious apologetics in early modernity had led theologians to bracket whatever was of specific religious character or warrant and to rely upon the new and prospering sciences for ‘the first foundations of religion.’ The implicit but unrecognized premise in such a strategy, building upon the new mechanics, was that the uniquely religious—in all of its experiential, traditional, institutional, and social forms—was cognitively empty.”¹⁸⁴ The truths of the faith should never be seen as a stepping stone building on top of the conclusions of reason. That procedure would be guilty of the evidentialist challenge.

According to evidentialists, beliefs are rational if and only if one has reasons to ground one’s belief. As W. K. Clifford memorably put it: “It is wrong always,

¹⁸³ Michael Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

¹⁸⁴ Michael Buckley, *Denying and Disclosing God: The Ambiguous Progress of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University, 2004), xi.

everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.”¹⁸⁵ Thus one should not believe in God or in Christianity unless one has good reasons to believe in it. But the Church insists that although one might have evidence to make faith reasonable, such evidence is not necessary for all believers to have ready in defense of the faith.¹⁸⁶ Only those believers endowed with certain virtues and/or callings are called to do rational apologetics. Instead, the ground upon which our faith rests is found in God’s revelation to humanity.

As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* plainly states: “What moves us to believe is not the fact that revealed truths appear as true and intelligible in the light of our natural reason: we believe ‘because of the authority of God himself who reveals them, who can neither deceive nor be deceived’.”¹⁸⁷ The bishops add: “Faith is *certain*. It is more certain than all human knowledge because it is founded on the very word of God who cannot lie.”¹⁸⁸ Therefore, arguments may help to confirm one’s belief in Christianity, and it may serve as a means of providing signs to unbelievers, but the arguments themselves do not constitute the ground upon which faith stands (or falls). Believing in Christ provides one with certainty of the truth of Christianity, but the reasons for this faith has more of a provisional character. Aquinas holds that Catholic faith can be known with as much certainty as first principles such as the law of non-contradiction!¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁵ W.K. Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief,” in *Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Baruch A. Brady, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1974), p. 246. Clifford’s essay was originally published in his *Lectures and Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1846), and has been reprinted numerous times.

¹⁸⁶ Ralph McInerney, “Analogy and Foundationalism in Thomas Aquinas,” 283.

¹⁸⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, N. 156

¹⁸⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, N. 157

¹⁸⁹ See the discussion and pertinent references in Etienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Thomism* (New York: P.J. Kenedy and Sons, 1964), 20.

Aware of the dangers of evidentialism, some theologians seem to be unaware of the distinction between the classical and modified versions of foundationalism, and they prematurely reject the enterprise of rational apologetics altogether. For them, it is reminiscent of the parasitical origins of atheism upon the apologist's attempts to defend Christianity. Accepting the widespread rejection of classical foundationalism, some of these theologians obviously do not recognize that fallibilist foundationalism is defensible, and that it includes first principles.

So, it is one thing to say there is such a thing as objective truth (which is possible because of first principles). But it is quite another to maintain that fallible human knowers can understand the truth *absolutely* (we are therefore endorsing a critical realism within the parameters set by fallibilist foundationalism, not a naïve realism on the one hand or an epistemological skepticism on the other). As Alister McGrath explains:

. . . these conclusions must be treated with caution. While there is a proper place for a critique of the Enlightenment's unrealistic aspirations to total objectivity of judgment, postmodernity must be seen as representing an ultimately indefensible alternative. A critical attitude to the Enlightenment on this specific issue does not lead to the problematic conclusion that no degree of objectivity is possible at all, so that all beliefs or interpretations can be held with equal merit. The proper response to the Enlightenment's unrealistic aspirations to objectivity is not to abandon any attempt at critical evaluation of interpretive possibilities, but to encourage a realistic and cautious attempt to determine which of the various interpretations of nature may be regarded as the 'best explanation,' as judged by criteria such as parsimony, elegance, or explanatory power.¹⁹⁰

First principles are not restricted to self-evident or incorrigible truths. They can be derived from history, culture, and other social contingencies, providing individuals with true understandings of the world.

Critiquing a method of *discovering* the truth is surely a different enterprise from defining what truth *is*. Thus the Cartesian epistemological tradition had it right when they understood truth as correspondence with reality—universal, objective, absolute, and

¹⁹⁰ Alister E. McGrath, *The Open Secret: A New Vision for Natural Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 155.

exclusive. The nature of truth had been accepted from the time of Plato and Aristotle and was not new at the time of the Enlightenment. Where Descartes may have erred was in the idea that *knowing the truth must be relegated to reason alone*. For there is a significant difference between the nature of truth and the means that are used to discover it. Catholics can agree with the entire previous western philosophical tradition with respect to the nature of truth, not with the latter which emanated from Descartes. Our *knowledge* of the truth (an epistemological issue) is influenced by culture, biology, political environment, upbringing, economics, gender, and so on, not whether *truth itself* (a metaphysical reality) is absolute, universal, objective, exclusive, eternally engaging, systematic, and one.

Postmodernism and the Prospects for Apologetics

The Thomistic arguments for God's existence all depend on first principles.¹⁹¹ If the Council Fathers at Vatican I had Aquinas's proofs for God's existence in mind,¹⁹² then it would not mean that classical foundationalism was being upheld by the Church. Rather, it means that a certain type of foundationalism was seen as valid. What the Council must be saying, in one way or another, is that some knowledge is universally known. Certainty in scholastic terminology allows for different degrees of conviction: logical certainty, moral certainty, virtual certainty, and so on.¹⁹³ "As a lifelong student of Aristotle," Ralph McInerney urges, "Thomas was convinced that there are sound and

¹⁹¹ It should be noted that according to Aquinas first principles are simultaneously both metaphysical *and* epistemological. Since Aquinas is a realist, there is no disjunction between the rational and the real.

¹⁹² For a discussion, see Fergus Kerr, "Knowing God by Reason Alone: What Vatican I Never Said," *New Blackfriars*, 91.1033 (May 2010): 215-228.

¹⁹³ Wilhelmson, *Man's Knowledge of Reality*, 171-173.

cogent proofs of God's existence. For Thomas, natural theology is not a possibility. It is a fact. It is the achievement of pagan philosophy. *Ab esse ad posse valet illatio.*"¹⁹⁴ Thus Aquinas's proofs capture an undeniable existential insight (nothing less, and nothing more). With fallibilist foundationalism in mind, Catholic apologists now might argue that any worldview that contradicts the fundamental claims of Church cannot be true (and so should be rejected).

Representatives of anti-apologism may retort: "Only the Holy Spirit will bring unbelievers to Christ, not human arguments." Now all of this is certainly true, but a couple of things must be kept in mind. First, the Spirit can work through humans who use arguments for evangelical purposes. It is not an either-or approach. It is not the Holy Spirit or human reason. It can be both. A rational God can use people to reach those who need evidence to believe in something. One can bring a horse to water, but no one can make him drink except by surrendering to the Spirit. God can work through the intellect to lend credibility to the decision of faith. And anything less would be fideistic.

In the words of Brian Hebblethwaite,

it is surely a mistake to regard the logic of theological rationality as something wholly internal to the perspective of faith. Torrence, and Barth too, are entirely persuasive in their insistence on theological rationality being responsive to the unique nature of theology's object. But the supposition that theological thinking has its own logic only available within the relation of grace and faith, has the same effect on Lonergan's insistence on conversion. It makes theology, natural or revealed, undiscussable, immune to criticism, and unsusceptible of being pondered hypothetically.¹⁹⁵

Many theologians are correct when they claim that faith has its own unique rationality that is unavailable to unbelievers. But this would not mean that theological claims should not be evaluated by Christians and their opponents. Nobody believes in anything unless they know that it is first believable. Faith, to be sure, is not a blind leap

¹⁹⁴ Ralph McInerney, *Characters in Search of Their Author*, The Gifford Lectures: Glasgow (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2001), 66.

¹⁹⁵ Brian Hebblethwaite, *In Defence of Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2005), 59.

in the dark without evidence. Neither will evidence demand faith, for unbelievers will always come up with different excuses as to why the Catholic faith is false or irrelevant. When considering the relevant reasons for faith, apologists must never give the impression that faith is based on the conclusions of reason. Rather, the Christian faith is based on the saving work of Jesus Christ. Faith, however, can be supported and reinforced by reason.

As a result of the modification from classical to fallibilist foundationalism, Catholic apologists will now have to resort, for the most part, to a cumulative case for Catholic faith, not apodictic demonstration (though God's existence can still be proven in the non-mathematical sense of the term if one is Thomistic in their philosophy). Apart from the *preambula fidei*, apologists work with probabilistic arguments in support of Christianity, which is predicated upon marshalling the best evidence we currently have in, say, science, history and philosophy. Though apologists argue for the plausibility of Catholic doctrines, they cannot defend these as objectively true unless they are willing to presuppose first principles which are not limited or relative to cultural, historical, or other social contingencies in the first place.¹⁹⁶ Unless first principles exist and can be known by all, the Catholic world and life view would remain insulated and we must then resort to fideism which holds that there is no reason why anyone should believe in anything at all.

Christian doctrine can be seen as an explanatory hypothesis that accounts for a wide variety of features, including history, the cosmos, and the nature of humanity. Christian scholars are now beginning to utilize newer approach to apologetics in contrast to the evidentialist challenge. As a reaction to modernism, postmodernism accords well

¹⁹⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Peri Hermeneias*, I, lect. 8

with the provisional nature of knowledge advanced by fallibilism. John Polkinghorne holds that believers can retain their presuppositions when comparing and contrasting their views with other competing claims. The final assessment is predicated on whose *Weltanschauung* resonates and makes the most sense out of the agreed upon evidence.¹⁹⁷

Though there is no consensus on which criteria should be used, apologists can learn from professional scientists who are used to evaluating their theories through multiple lines of criteria.¹⁹⁸ George Ellis argues that scientific theories are assessed in light of four standards: simplicity, beauty, accuracy in prediction and verifiability, and explanatory power—a capacity for giving the most adequate account of problematic data.¹⁹⁹ Philosopher of science Ernan McMullin offers six criteria: predictive accuracy, internal coherence, external consistency, unifying power, fertility, and simplicity.²⁰⁰ Other notable scientists, such as Howard J. Van Till, Ian Barbour, and Francisco Ayala, offer another distinctive set of criteria to test their scientific theories.²⁰¹

In Defense of a Primitive Correspondence Theory of Truth

¹⁹⁷ John C. Polkinghorne, “Physics and Metaphysics in a Trinitarian Perspective,” *Theology and Science* 1 (2003), 33-49.

¹⁹⁸ Cf. McGrath, *The Open Secret*, 235, 236.

¹⁹⁹ George Ellis, “The Thinking Underlying the New ‘Scientific’ World-Views,” in Robert John Russell, William R. Stoeger, and Francisco Ayala (eds.), *Evolutionary and Molecular Biology: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action* (Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory Publications, and Berkeley, CA: Center for Theology and Natural Sciences, 1998), 251-280.

²⁰⁰ Ernan McMullin, “Values in Science,” in Peter D. Asquith and Thomas Nickles (eds.) *PSA 1982: Proceedings of the 1982 Biennial Meeting of the Philosophy of Science Association*, vol. 2 (East Lansing: Philosophy of Science Association, 1982), 1-25.

²⁰¹ Howard J. Van Till, “The Character of Contemporary Natural Science,” in Howard J. Van Till, et al. *Portraits of Creation: Biblical and Scientific Perspectives on the World’s Formation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 141-145; Francisco Ayala, “Darwin’s Devolution: Design Without a Designer,” in Robert John Russell, William R. Stoeger, and Francisco Ayala (eds.), *Evolutionary and Molecular Biology: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action* (Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory, and Berkeley: Center for Theology and Natural Sciences, 1998), 113, 114; Ian Barbour, *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998), 113.

Until the middle of the nineteenth century almost every mainstream philosopher in the West held to some form of the correspondence theory of truth. In the correspondence view (or, as others might call it, a “realist conception of truth”), minds are either knowing or ignorant; propositions are either true or false; and reality is either real or imaginary. Truth pertains to those properties of a proposition which refers to reality.²⁰² So when a proposition (i.e., a belief, thought, statement, or any other mode of representation) accurately represents reality, then the proposition is said to be true. When the proposition does not correspond to reality, then the proposition is said to be false (or, depending on the content of the proposition, it may be partially true or false). When a mind assents to a true proposition, then the person is said to have knowledge of the truth.

A proposition, moreover, needs to be distinguished from a sentence. A proposition is what a sentence either affirms or denies. Another way to understand this is that a proposition is what a sentence *means*. Questions, imperatives, exclamations, requests, and entreaties are not propositions, but presuppose the truth of at least one proposition which successfully refers to reality. For example, the imperative command, “do not allow abortions!,” is not a proposition as such, but presupposes the proposition that “abortion is wrong.” The proposition “abortion is wrong” corresponds to the reality of the moral realm.

Propositions, moreover, can be controversial, trivial, obscure, frightening, or comforting. Yet none of these features of propositions would refute a primitive correspondence theory of truth. Although the significance or subjective effect of a proposition might be person relative, this would not mean the truth or falsity of the

²⁰² Paul K. Moser, Dwayne H. Mulder, and J.D. Trout, *The Theory of Knowledge: A Thematic Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1998), 65.

proposition (or the correspondence theory itself) should be cast into doubt. Hence, the nature of a proposition needs to be distinguished from the effects it has on persons. God's revelation is propositional, but it comes to persons in various forms, and it has many different effects on individuals and/or communities. Thus the purpose of the propositional model is to ensure that one Mind is communicating with human minds. Without a propositional view, the cognitive content that is necessary for interpersonal communication is rendered impossible.

Similarly, a proposition is not the same thing as a perspective. Everyone has perspectives about what they *think* is the truth. Perspectives can be biased, prejudiced, ignorant, and uninformed, but this is not the same thing as saying that truth itself is relative. Rather, a perspective is always a perspective on or about something, or someone, independent and outside of the percipient's viewpoint. Perspectives are either successful or unsuccessful in their attempt to capture reality. Taken to the extreme, perspectivalism is self-stultifying, for it assumes that perspectivalism is true—and that all other views in competition with it must be false. Hence truth must be distinguished from *what is true*, how one arrives at the truth, and the effects that truth has on persons. In no way is metaphysical objectivity incompatible with epistemological subjectivity. Our epistemological thrust toward the truth is loaded with all sorts of factors which influence us as limited knowers—level of intelligence, background beliefs, education, gender, motivation, personal interests, upbringing, genetics, etc.

All true propositions have a few common characteristics. First, truth is exclusive and antithetical. For every article of faith that is pronounced as true, any other viewpoint

which is in opposition to it will necessarily be false. In this way, truth is, by definition, antithetical. Anything that opposes the truth is incorrect. Moreover, truth is specific.

The Council expresses this concern from a theological standpoint about doctrine in *Gaudium et Spes* 21 and *Dei Verbum* 1. Truth, moreover, is absolute (truth applies to everyone, at all times and everywhere) and objective (if something is true then it is true for everyone regardless if anyone believes in it or knows it or not). Not to be overlooked, truth is also eternally engaging (it can never be exhausted). Truth is unified and systematic (truth is one; truth will never contradict another truth). It is always an end in and of itself; it is never a mere means to an end.

There are at least two positive arguments in support of a primitive correspondence view of truth. First, the theory has commonsense appeal. Before one comes to the philosophical task of understanding the world, one already has a common-sense notion of what truth is. At least one form of the correspondence theory of truth seems to capture both common-sense appeal. Therefore its pre-analytic justification gives individuals something with which to start. When most people speak of truth, they are usually referring to “what is the case.” Second, those who endorse arguments against the correspondence theory seem to presuppose it in their presentations. In short, the correspondence theory of truth seems rationally inescapable. To say that “truth does not correspond to reality” one must implicitly hold that this describes a true state of affairs.

Aquinas, for instance, holds that there is no disjunction between the rational and the real. Aquinas is a realist. First principles, in Aquinas’ view, are *both* metaphysical and epistemological. Thus individuals have no choice but to use them. Because Catholic theology holds that human beings are made in the image of God, it recognizes

that knowledge is possible (i.e., one Timeless Mind is capable of creating other minds; the Timeless Mind is also capable of communicating--and guaranteeing that communication takes place--with those other minds). *How* does the apologist know truth? Because the Catholic apologist *begins* with the lived experience of Catholic truth, she or he is allowed to know truth *in a way* that is not possible without the influence of God's grace.

If someone holds to the correspondence theory of truth and claims to believe in Jesus Christ, this would not mean that she has unlimited or perfect knowledge of God (or any other doctrine believed by Christians). For every kataphatic statement of theology there is an apophatic element. Hence, to deny that absolute truth can be known not only gets something wrong about philosophy, but it also gets something wrong about the nature of faith. Having faith does not stretch the shape of truth in a direction that is unnatural to reason, but strengthens and clarifies what persons naturally desire to know. Advocates of critical realism recognize that we are always in the process of trying to achieve a truer perspective about the truth. Nor would belief in the universal lordship of Jesus Christ entail that we can prove the truth of the Catholic Church to anyone at will. Mentioned earlier, verifying Christian faith and positing it as the truth are two very different things. When someone believes in the absolute truth of Christianity, this would not preclude one from participating in the give and take of argument and evidence both for and against faith. For genuine respect for the mystery of faith will seek to understand more fully that which is believed. Of course, the process of trying to understand the faith will include vigorous intellectual striving and therefore be an attempt to reach people with good arguments for the Gospel. Nor would the belief that Catholicism is true mean

that everything that we believe as Catholics must be held definitively or that we are always inerrant in our understanding of the truth.

Addressing Critics

In this section we are going to address arguments against a primitive correspondence theory of truth from within the standpoint of philosophical theology. The reason for addressing these objections is that they are often used to undercut the need for rational apologetics.

The first objection is that *the correspondence theory is not found in the Bible or in Church teaching*. Now, it has never been the primary intention of the Church to enunciate a particular theory of truth. When the Church pronounces on certain theological matters, she assumes that her doctrines are true. This does not mean that the Scriptural writers did not unthematically presuppose the soundness of a particular theory of truth (namely, truth as correspondence with reality).²⁰³ The biblical terms for truth are *emet* and *aletheia*. Though these terms are broadly understood and multifaceted, the biblical writers assumed that the actions they referred to when using these terms were actions of reality: faithfulness, or rectitude, etc. Clearly, the Scriptural writers assumed that what they were saying in regard to salvation depended upon metaphysical realities and held to other similar *assumptions*.²⁰⁴ As one commentator puts it: “In tradition, in addition to the use of the notion of truth derived from Greek philosophy [i.e., truth as correspondence], we find in some of the fathers and in the liturgy a resumption and

²⁰³ Matthew Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics: Aquinas and the Renewal of Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford; Wiley Blackwell, 2004).

²⁰⁴ The Scriptural writers did not spell out the existence-essence distinction, or the relationship between act and potency, but they assumed that there was an world that was external to their minds, and that objective truths could known as such (that Christ is the Savior), etc.

development of the biblical conception of truth, but sometimes with a stronger emphasis on its doctrinal aspect. Generally speaking, truth designates the Christian faith, i.e., the divine revelation as it has been handed down in the church.”²⁰⁵

The next objection is *that the correspondence theory is unable to account for the mysteries of faith*. These objectors are often influenced by Eastern religious thought. In this view, all religions are seen as inadequate pointers to what is ultimately inexpressible. This ultimate mystery exceeds the use of human logic.

The project of rational apologetics will certainly be undercut if believers are unable to give a reason for their hope. There might as well be no apologetic mandate at all if God cannot be spoken of. For there would be no common points of contact with persons who do not share our common faith convictions. And if there are no common points of contact with doubters and outsiders, then how could anyone be held accountable for rejecting the Christian God?

Christians must learn how to understand the incomprehensibility of God in such a way that still preserves some knowledge of the divine. It is not under dispute that Catholic truth is deeper than conceptual and linguistic categories of speech. Truth is more than rational; it is personal, moral, dynamic, and life changing. There is always room to explore the fullness of truth even more fully. Just because there is absolute truth, this would not mean that our understanding of it is absolute. Although truth goes above reason, it is definitely not irrational. There is a sense in which the “otherness” of God evades both cognitive and linguistic categories, but this would not mean all language is incapable of adequately referring to God. One cannot say that language does not apply to

²⁰⁵ Ignace de la Potterie, “Truth,” in *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, ed. René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella (New York: Crossroad, 2000), 1133.

God unless one is capable of successfully applying certain concepts to God in the first place. Take the statement “no linguistic categories or conceptions can apply meaningfully to God.” One would have to know something meaningful about God in order to know that ‘nothing’ linguistic or conceptual applies to him; theologians cannot know what *God is not* unless one already knows what *God is*.²⁰⁶

To say God is not a creature, one must have some previous understanding of God. Thus, one must know something about the term ‘God’ in order to employ the *via negativa*. Otherwise one could not distinguish God from created entities. Thus the issue is not *whether* we can apply certain concepts to God, but *how* we pour meaning into those concepts. The way meaning is poured into these concepts has traditionally been negative.

Some postmodernists might respond by noting that *first principles are merely expressions of Aristotelian logic*—constructions of Western thought which are not applicable to other times and cultures (or religious understanding). Wilfred Cantwell Smith is representative of this outlook: “Modern Western logic, I myself am pretty sure, though serviceable for computers, is in other ways inept and is particularly ill-suited, it seems, for thinking about spiritual matters.”²⁰⁷ Not only does Smith smuggle in an “objection from mystery” (objection 2) here, but he also challenges the universality of first principles by affirming that they are conditioned.

A few things could be said in response to this. Smith seems to be confusing the nature of propositions with the linguistic style and/or thought patterns used to express a proposition. According to philosophers William Lane Craig and J.P. Moreland:

In his *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas used a literary style in which his prose explicitly follows strict logical form and syllogistic presentation. By contrast, an isolated culture in

²⁰⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1, 13, 2

²⁰⁷ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Faith of Other Men* (New York: Mentor, 1965), 17.

the mountains of Brazil may use a poetic form of oral tradition, their sentences may not follow an explicit, tidy subject-predicate form, and they may reach tribal conclusions in ways quite foreign to Western culture. But none of this has anything to do with the deep logical structure that underlies their claims or with the conformance of their individual assertions to the three laws of logic, and it is simply a mistake to think otherwise. We invite the reader to present any declarative utterance in any culture, including the assertion that ‘Western logic,’ is culturally relative, that does not conform to Aristotle’s three laws of logic. Any such assertion, to the degree that it is meaningful or asserted as true or false, will conform to the three laws of logic. Any alleged counterexample will either be self-refuting or meaningless. After all, Aristotle did not invent these laws any more than Columbus invented the New World. Aristotle may have been a Western thinker and he may have discovered these laws, but that does not imply that the laws themselves are Western constructions.²⁰⁸

Thus, there is a difference between cultural expressions and the underlying logic which undergirds every person’s thinking.²⁰⁹ Mentioned earlier, a proposition is not the same thing as a sentence. John Searle points out: “From the fact that a description can only be made relative to a set of linguistic categories, it does not follow that the facts/states of affairs, etc., described can only exist relative to a set of categories.”²¹⁰ The relativity of sentences would not count as a refutation of the correspondence theory. How our language applies terms is often relative, but this would not mean that some other theory of truth should be preferred over the correspondence theory. Says Searle: “We arbitrarily define the word ‘cat’ in such and such a way; and only relative to such and such definitions can we say, ‘That’s a cat.’ But once we have made the definitions and once we have applied the concepts relative to the system of definitions, whether or not something satisfies our definition is no longer arbitrary or relative. That we use the word ‘cat’ the way we do is up to us; that there is an object that exists independently of that use, and satisfies that use, is a plain matter of (absolute, intrinsic, mind independent)

²⁰⁸ William Lane Craig and J.P. Moreland, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, (Downer’s Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), 134.

²⁰⁹ The underlying logic that I refer to is never “truth in and of itself,” but is always in the process of being interpreted and understood differently.

²¹⁰ John R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1995), 166.

fact.”²¹¹ In effect, the idea that the relative selection of terms should prevent persons from saying that anything can be objectively true makes no more sense than saying that one cannot satisfy their craving for a dessert because there are many kinds of desserts.

A rejection of the correspondence theory is certainly no substitute for actually refuting it. Saying that “first principles are merely expressions of Aristotelian logic” is tantamount to excluding other propositions that implicitly affirm the first principles. So if the objection is true, then it must be false. And if it is false, then it is false as well. Further justification of the assertion that “first principles are merely the expressions of Aristotelian logic” would, in one way or another, have to employ first principles in the first place.

Still other critics complain that *truth is uninformative and uninteresting in the correspondence theory*.²¹² Objective truth is static, abstract, cold, and impersonal. Thus Smith says that truth is not to be found in propositions, but in persons alone: “Truth, I submit, is a humane, not an objective, concept. It does not lie in propositions.”²¹³ At this point in the paper we should set aside the obviously self-refuting nature of Smith’s contention and demonstrate that even if the point is granted, this would still not count as an argument against the correspondence theory. Rather, it serves as an argument against the possibility of knowing *what* the truth is. Truth is formally distinct from *what* is true. In the case of the Catholic apologist, there are truths that are already assumed.

²¹¹ Ibid., 166.

²¹² Wilfred Cantwell Smith, “A Human View of Truth,” in *Truth and Dialogue in World Religions: Conflicting Truth Claims*, ed. John Hick (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 20; idem, *Questions of Religious Truth* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1967), 67, 68.

²¹³ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989), 190. Also see Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Questions of Religious Truth* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1967), 67, 68.

There are two basic avenues the apologist can take which seem to make this objection irrelevant. On the one hand, one can make arguments from the “bottom up” on the basis of first principles and arrive to some undeniable conclusions, namely, that truth is objective, that God exists, that human beings are more than just material stuff. These truths are based upon first principles. This approach is confident about our mutually shared assumptions (human nature and self-evident first principles). This was a more traditional apologetic methodology. Perhaps the truth that something exists is uninformative and abstract, but we can also know with certainty that God exists, and that an anti-realist view of truth is false. Perhaps these truths are “uninteresting,” but then again this is clearly person relative and thus does not apply to everyone!

On the other hand, it is perfectly acceptable to begin with Christian truth claims and then compare and contrast them with competing perspectives. From the outset apologists claim that some things are true, and then attempts to rationally argue for these truths. Everyone must begin somewhere; *all* people interpret reality in a way that is consistent with their underlying presuppositions. No Catholic who holds to the correspondence theory of truth is left with a floating, uninformative conception of truth, but presupposes the truths of Catholic Christianity. There is no reason to suppose that because Christian truth is absolute and unchanging that it cannot be a channel by which individuals come to better understand and experience God.²¹⁴ Personal encounter with the divine simply cannot take place in a cognitive vacuum, but assumes that some things are absolutely true.

The final assessment in this newer, “top-down” approach is predicated on whose worldview and value system resonates and thus makes the most sense out of the agreed

²¹⁴ Paul Helm, *Divine Revelation* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1982), 27.

upon evidence. Even if this approach begins with a Catholic worldview, this would not have to mean that the Good News is irrational (or that the evidence in favor of the Catholic faith cannot be trusted). Perhaps the Gospel is true and the evidence is trustworthy. As C.S. Lewis wrote: “I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen—not only because I see it, but because of it, I see everything else.”²¹⁵ Catholic apologists can begin with their presuppositions. This is no different for anyone else coming at the debate from within their perspectives of the world. It is possible that Christians know the truth about God *because* of faith. What is needed to help persons to determine the truth would still be the careful weighing and assessing of the accepted evidence from the various sides and perspectives to the best of our God given abilities in the dialogue and/or debate.

Absolute truth prevents inculturation and human individuality. However, there is a difference between the nature of truth and the various ways in which individuals and groups of people arrive at the truth and express it. There is a difference between the nature of truth and the effect it has on individuals. Truth, as we have seen, is not parochial, partial, and it is not provincial. It allows for creative cultural expression and individuality so long as the Catholic worldview is believed and faithfully lived out. Conversely, certain cultures can make the Gospel message more conducive for reception within that particular culture. Receiving God’s truth does not flatten us out in blind obedience to Christ, but liberates persons to become who they were meant to be. Affirming the objective truth of Catholicism carves out space for the development of individual spiritual gifts, callings, and personality types in the risen Christ.

²¹⁵ C.S. Lewis, “Is Theology Poetry?,” *Essay Collection and Other Short Pieces* (London: Harper Collins, 2000), 21.

Apologists now might argue that we would expect the one true faith to be able to affect all people, regardless of the culture they inhabit. When missionaries endeavor to present the timeless truths of the Gospel to persons who have been unaffected by the Catholic world and life view, they are not starting from nothing, but are convinced that because every human being is made in the image of God, there are many things (including the Gospel itself) that all persons can understand. Listen to John Paul II: “In proclaiming Christ to non-Christians, the missionary is convinced that through the working of the Spirit, there already exists in individuals and peoples an expectation, even if an unconscious one, of knowing the truth about God, about man, and about how we are to be set free from sin and death. The missionary’s enthusiasm in proclaiming Christ comes from the conviction that he is responding to that expectation, and so he does not become discouraged or cease his witness even when he is called to manifest his faith in an environment that is hostile or indifferent.”²¹⁶

If the Gospel message is true, then we would expect the message to be capable of resonance with persons—no matter when they live or where they are from. As the framers of *Gaudium et Spes* state: “Moreover, since in virtue of her mission and nature she is bound to no particular form of human culture, nor to any political, economic, or social system, the Church by her very universality can be a very close bond between diverse human communities and nations, provided these trust her and truly acknowledge her right to true freedom in fulfilling her mission.”²¹⁷ Although human minds are subject to the fluidity of semantics and the syntax of numerous languages and thought patterns, there are some structural constants—such as first principles, fallibilist foundationalism,

²¹⁶ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, N. 45.

²¹⁷ *Gaudium et Spes*, 42.

and the referential nature of propositions. It is noteworthy that Vatican II says that the Church should be more focused on what unites us as a human race to generate a sense of unity instead of considering the particularities that are becoming increasingly apparent as of late.²¹⁸

Apologists will now want to emphasize the success of missionary activity across the many cultures of the world (to bolster their claims about Christ). For if Christianity true, then it will make sense to more than one limited group of persons. Relevant is the *Catechism*: “Only faith can recognize that the Church possesses these properties from her divine source. But their historical manifestations are signs that also speak clearly to human reason. As the First Vatican Council noted, the ‘Church herself, with her marvelous propagation, eminent holiness, and inexhaustible fruitfulness in everything good, her catholic unity and invincible stability, is a great and perpetual motive of credibility and an irrefutable witness of her divine mission’.”²¹⁹ The catholicity of the Church testifies to the fact that people from different cultural and religious backgrounds can come to understand the same basic Gospel message, and that it changes individuals and even whole societies for the better.²²⁰

Lastly, *some claim that either/or thinking can lead to violence.*²²¹ Aside from the fact that either/or thinking is rationally inescapable (i.e., the law of non-contradiction), it must be stressed that first principles do not lead persons to become violent, but that certain understandings and applications of what is thought to be true can steer persons

²¹⁸ Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 61.

²¹⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, N. 812.

²²⁰ I am not saying that the missionary spread of Christianity is a sufficient argument for the apologist, only that it is a noteworthy claim that needs to be seriously considered.

²²¹ When I speak of “violence,” I am speaking of evils committed under the banner of Christian faith.

down the path of violence. Well-meaning Christians who believe that everything should be conceived in one shade of black and white may unknowingly harbor bad attitudes to justify violence that is opposed to healthy forms of faith and evangelism.

So I am not saying that we should renounce hard truth claims, but that certain (shortsighted) *interpretations* of them need to be jettisoned. In a rigid view of truth it becomes easy for Christians to view outsiders as enemies who deserve to be punished because they think differently than believers. As Charles Kimball points out: “When particular understandings become rigidly fixed, and uncritically appropriated as absolute truths, well-meaning people can and often do paint themselves into a corner from which they must assume a defensive or even offensive posture.”²²² Catholic thinking does not do away with absolutes, but allows for a variety of interpretations within an orthodox spectrum. Truth leads to a symphony of voices in unity, not stagnant uniformity. Part of the post-conciliar apologetic approach is one that will include goodness, relationality, beauty and truth. If there is one good thing that postmodernists have taught us, it is that the quest for human understanding cannot be reduced to reason alone. In this very way, postmodernism serves as a corrective to Enlightenment rationalism.

A reason alone approach to faith can incite individuals to rationalism and then combativeness. But on the other hand, I submit that when Christians limit the intellectual engagement of faith, then this can make them prone to become violent as well. For example, it is a known fact that David Koresh and Jim Jones ordered the women in their groups to have sex with them. These women completely bypassed the voice of common sense and conscience and, in blind faith, did what they were told—all in the name of

²²² Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), 46. Cf. Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Viking, 2006), 51, 251, 295.

“faith.” Thus when reason and faith are divorced from one another, then this can lead persons to become violent. Healthy Catholic faith affects all of a person’s nature, including the mind. It can begin by having adequate evidence, continuing in the proper disciplining of the emotions which culminates in virtuous conduct in cooperation with God’s will. Catholic faith is all about responsible thinking, personal freedom, and common sense. Faith is a rational step into the light, demanding responsible thinking; it is not a credulous leap in the dark. Reasons can be given for faith; and no truth of reason will ever contradict the truths of faith.

It should be stressed that the specificity of accepting Catholic Christianity involves high stakes in the life of discipleship; it demands that we become tactfully confrontational with all kinds of evil in the world (cf. 1 John 2:15-17). Catholics simply cannot rest content in a world streaming with error and many forms of injustice. Apologists must still remain person sensitive and culturally aware within the confines of her truth centered dialogue and debate with those who do not share our beliefs. According to Vatican II, the study of other world religions should help Catholics to learn how to refute the errors in other faiths: “Let them also be introduced to a knowledge of other religions which are more widespread in individual regions, so that they may acknowledge more correctly what truth and goodness these religions, in God's providence, possess, and so that they may learn to refute their errors and be able to communicate the full light of truth to those who do not have it.”²²³ In *Ad Gentes*, the Fathers of the faith state: “Moreover let them take care that apostolic activity be not

²²³ *Optatum Totius*, 16. Cf. *Dignitatis Humanae*, 11.

limited to those only who have already been converted. A fair proportion of personnel and funds should be assigned to the evangelization of non-Christians.”²²⁴

Conclusion

Many postmodernists do not see truth as an objective description of reality. As a result of this paradigmatic shift, the Church’s central claims are no longer seen as binding on all persons. Rather, the Catholic worldview is reinterpreted in terms of opinion. Indirectly this shift makes rational apologetics unfashionable. Because theologians have been relatively silent in addressing this most salient challenge to faith, the need to reinstate the project of rational arguments has been neglected. Philosophical, historical, aesthetic, and experiential evidence may be plausible in making the beliefs of Catholics more credible than competing claims, but for the hardheaded skeptic who is willing to think through the reasons for and against the Church, this form of apologetics remains indispensable for the purposes of Christian evangelization.

C.S. Lewis once captured this insight in the *Screwtape Letters*. In the story the senior demon of hell, Screwtape, instructs a lower ranking demon on how to dissuade persons’ from seriously taking the role of reason and evidence in the life of Christian faith. For in so doing, skeptics and other lukewarm believers will be less convinced of Christianity. After all, says Screwtape to his disciple in training: “Your man has been accustomed, ever since he was a boy, to have a dozen incompatible philosophies dancing about together inside his head. He doesn’t think of doctrines as primarily ‘true’ or ‘false,’ but as ‘academic’ or ‘practical,’ ‘outworn’ or ‘contemporary,’ ‘conventional’ or

²²⁴ *Ad Gentes*, 30. Cf. 39, 40.

‘ruthless.’ Jargon, not argument, is your best ally in keeping him from the Church.”²²⁵

Indeed, Screwtape knew that clear thinking was on the side of the Church.

²²⁵ C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1961), 8.

A TEST CASE IN CLASSICAL (SCHOLASTIC) APOLOGETICS

One of the traditional hallmarks of Thomistic philosophy is that God's existence can be known with certainty apart from the influence of authoritative, divine revelation. This longstanding belief in the church reached somewhat of a high point at the First Vatican Council on April 24, 1870 when, in response to the prevailing trends of traditionalism, rationalism, and fideism, the Council Fathers steered a middle course in response to these extreme positions, declaring that God's existence can be known with certainty through the natural light of human reason.²²⁶

Though criticisms advanced by Hume and Kant are occasionally addressed by Thomists, this essay brings contemporary atheism face to face with Aquinas and his interpreters. This issue in apologetic theology is always necessary, for as Kasper writes:

Modern atheism [which stems from the philosophies of the Enlightenment] has put theology in a difficult position. Of particular importance here is mass atheism, a phenomenon unparalleled in past history; it regards the practical, if not theoretical denial of God or at least indifference to belief in God as being by far the most plausible attitude to take. As a result, theology has been stripped of its power to speak to people and to communicate with them. There are now no generally accepted images, symbols, concepts, or categories with which it can make itself understood. The crisis in the presuppositions for understanding talk about God is the real crisis of present day theology. To put the matter in more Scholastic terms; the crisis of contemporary theology arises from the loss of the *preambula fidei*, that is, of the presuppositions which faith needs if it is to be possible as faith and if it is to be able to make itself intelligible as faith.

²²⁶ Bernard Lonergan, "Natural Knowledge of God," *A Second Collection*, (Philadelphia, Westminster, 1974), 118, 133, rightly says that natural knowledge of God *can* be achieved by some persons, but is not achievable by everyone. I agree with this contention. Not everyone is called to present the arguments of natural theology, and not everyone will be (or can be) receptive to these arguments either. Lonergan lays out some of the factors that might prevent individuals from achieving a natural knowledge of God: "In the present instance men must exist. They must be healthy and enjoy considerable leisure. They must have attained a sufficient differentiation of consciousness to think philosophically. They must have succeeded in avoiding all the pitfalls in which so many philosophers have been entrapped. They must resist their personal evil tendencies and not be seduced by the bad examples others. Such are just a few very general conditions of someone actually grasping a valid argument for God's existence."

Thus the person relative approach (on whether to present arguments for God's existence) is precisely the main point I am driving home in my dissertation. Not to be overlooked, the fact that natural theology is not always effective is not a legitimate excuse to reject the enterprise either. Both common sense and the Vatican Councils endorse the importance of reasoned defenses of Christianity, including the importance of natural theology.

The quandary becomes clear when we consider the various ways in which theology comes to grips with modern atheism.²²⁷

This chapter is not so much a critical work in Thomistic philosophy as much as it seeks to highlight the contemporary trends in atheist criticism of Aquinas' arguments for God's existence. We will focus in particular on Aquinas' *intellectus essentiae* argument for God's existence as the representative piece of natural theology. In order to highlight these atheistic trends, I will also discuss how Thomists have generally responded back to them. The purpose of this essay is to help theologians and Christian philosophers to be alert of the major atheistic critiques of Thomistic natural theology and to understand the different responses currently being given to them.

Hopefully the chapter of this dissertation will restore the possibility of a philosophical apologetics in a post-conciliar church. This chapter will exploit the soundness of Thomist natural theology, and it also admits the insufficiency of the classical approach, at least in terms of recognizing the truth of Christian faith. In this way, the combinational model of the Council might be upheld, reinstating the importance of combinationalism.

Knowing That God Exists

Thomistic philosophers agree that natural knowledge of God is not necessarily philosophical. It is (and can be) pre-philosophical. Thus professional philosophers are not at an advantage over the ordinary person when it comes to knowing that there is a God. As Walter Kasper explains: "Thomas says the same thing in a more substantive way. . . This element of the unconditioned in the conditioned is not first brought home to

²²⁷ Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell, (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1984), 47.

us by a complicated proof; it is grasped unthematically in every knowledge of the conditioned as conditioned. When thus understood, the cosmological argument is in the final analysis simply reflecting this primordial knowledge; it is an explanation of the astonishment felt at the wonder of being.”²²⁸

The ordinary person does not have the time, energy, or resources to study the arguments for and against God’s existence. But this does not prevent them from knowing that there is a God. And this is why, at the end of each of the Five Ways, Aquinas says with confidence: “and this is the God that *all* people speak of.”

Let us now spell out this pre-philosophical intuition in the form of a philosophical argument for God’s existence. Many scholars maintain that behind the Five Ways there is one basic form of argument. Each of the Ways begins with a different starting point (i.e., change, causality, contingency, perfection, and final causality), but they all presuppose the existence/essence distinction spelled out in one of Aquinas’ earlier and more influential tracts, the *De Ente et Essentia*.²²⁹ Commonly known as the *intellectus essentiae* argument for God, I will elaborate and defend a contemporary version in this chapter. One of the argument’s strengths is that it establishes a being whose essence and existence are identical. Its essence *is* to exist. While each of the Five Ways, as arguments *simpliciter*, do not entail all the traditional attributes of God, within their broader philosophical context they lead to nothing else. That metaphysical context is provided in a more immediate sense in the *De Ente*.

²²⁸ Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 103.

²²⁹ See chapter 4 of Thomas Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, trans. Joseph Bobik, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1988).

Although many atheists are unwilling to grant the truth of most premises in Thomas' arguments, some of them maintain that his proofs remain one of the best resources for justifying theistic belief. At the very least, they argue, the cosmological argument has epistemic value for theism. It may fail as a proof, but theists are given ample reason for still holding that there is a God.²³⁰

Premise 1: At least one potential being exists. It is impossible to deny that something exists without implicitly conceding to the truth of the premise in the process of denying it. If someone denies that something exists, then it should be admitted that they are saying is something significant. Otherwise, why listen to the person? Hence the proposition 'nothing exists' is self-defeating. While it is logically possible that nothing exists, it is actually undeniable that something exists. Because the proposition "at least one potential being exists" is not logically compelling, the argument does not proceed on the assumption that we are proving logically the existence of God.

When Aquinas speaks of demonstrating God's existence, he does not speak of proving God in the logical sense of a proof. It is logically possible that nothing ever existed,—including the universe and God,—but it still remains undeniable that something exists. Logic cannot show that something exists, only that it is possible for something to exist. When I say that a *potential* being exists, I mean that a being exists that does not have to exist. It is possible that these beings do not have to exist. This is an undeniable fact of experience. A potential being is a being that did not have to come into existence, but nevertheless still exists without ultimate necessity.

²³⁰ J.L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1982), 89; William L. Rowe, *The Cosmological Argument* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1975), 249-269. Cf. Antony Flew, *God and Philosophy* (London: Hutchinson, 1966), 102.

We will now argue for the existence of *potential* beings. First, beings must either be necessary, possible (potential) or impossible. Philosophically speaking, this exhausts all of our options. We can set aside the existence of an impossible being, for an impossible being is not. Neither is the being that currently exists a necessary being. A necessary being is a being that cannot fail to exist. The nonexistence of a necessary being is a contradiction in terms. If there is a necessary being, then it exists out of necessity. A necessary being, moreover, is equivalent to a purely actual being with no potential. An actual being with no potential must have many attributes: immutability (not able to be changed), simplicity (not divisible), eternity (not in time), infinity (not limited), etc. The beings that currently exist, however, are beings in space and time.

As a simple being, a necessary being cannot be partly anything. Nor can there be more than one actual being. For if there were more than one, then there would have to be something which distinguishes the one from the other. There would have to be something that the one has which the other lacks, but this cannot be the case if each of them is unlimited. More importantly, an actual being must be uncaused. It is undeniable in light of these attributes (of a purely actual existent) that the beings that do exist are not actual beings with no potential. Those things that exist are changing, moving in space and time, and have the capacity for additional causal change. They are not wholly simple, immaterial and immutable.

Potential beings are undeniable fact of sensory existence. Atheists do not dispute the first premise.²³¹ As Richard M. Gale notes, “These are commonplace observational

²³¹ Further support can be found in J.J.C. Smart and John Haldane, *Atheism and Theism*, 2d. ed. (Cambridge: Blackwell, 2003), 35. Cf. Peter Angeles, *The Problem of God* (Columbus: Charles E. Merrill, 1974), 23, 27.

facts that only a complete skeptic about our senses would want to challenge.”²³² Graham Oppy agrees: “the first premise in the argument seems unproblematic: there are many beings that are ‘contingent’.”²³³

Premise 2: The existence of every potential being is actualized by another.

Whatever has the potential for nonexistence is not a purely actual being. Because a potential being is not a purely actual being, the former must be caused or preserved in existence by something other than itself. No potentiality can actualize itself. Therefore, there must be some actuality apart from it that can account for its existence. Likewise, every potential being needs a cause, not just “some” potential beings.²³⁴ For if any potential being exists, then it does not have to exist. When I speak of the actualization of potential beings, I am referring to the transition that takes place in a being from potentiality to actuality (all the while retaining its potential for additional change). The change that takes place is referring to a sustaining cause, not a cause in the temporal sense of becoming. Jordan Howard Sobel accepts the causal premise of Aquinas: “Whatever else they would be, sustaining causes would be *necessary* for the existence of things they sustained. But that is not all they would be, for they would be *sustaining* these things and so engaged in ‘activity’ somehow sufficient for their existence.”²³⁵

Nicholas Everitt agrees: “in all our experiences of series of events, we have never

²³² Richard M. Gale, “The Failure of Classical Theistic Arguments,” in Michael Martin, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2007), 90.

²³³ Graham Oppy, *Arguing About Gods* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2006), 104.

²³⁴ Cf. Jordan Howard Sobel, *Logic and Theism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2004), 170, 171.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 180.

experienced an event which did not depend on a predecessor, and if we try to think of what an event might depend on other than a predecessor, no answer comes to mind.”²³⁶

The second premise is evident given the aforementioned definition of change. Change means to pass from a state of potentiality to a state of actually having it. Although rocks do not have the potential to express emotion, persons have that potential. When this potential is actualized in people, then they change in feeling. A being that changes must have some potential for that change. Otherwise this change could never become actualized. No potential for being a certain way can actualize itself. For potentiality is not actual. The essence, form, or quiddity of a potential object cannot be what brings it into existence, for considered in itself, potentiality is the mere essence of something, not an actuality. Thus potentiality cannot cause anything.

But when an actual being has potential, then it must be caused by something other than itself. As Peter Angeles rightly states: “If the thing were *not* prior to itself in order to cause its existence, then something else must have been in existence to bring it into existence—and such a happening is *not self-causation*.”²³⁷ The sheer potential to be something cannot account for why something might achieve that potential. The possibility for existence does not account for existence. Sheer potentiality (essence) is not the same as actuality (existence).

Only something that actually exists can account for the existence of something else. As John Shook admits, “Premise {2} and variations on its theme (such as ‘every effect must have a cause’) appear to make sound common sense. Intellectual curiosity and scientific methodology spring from this basic theme, which appears to be essential to

²³⁶ Nicholas Everitt, *The Non-Existence of God* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 67. Cf. Peter Angeles, *The Problem of God*, 74, 75.

²³⁷ Peter Angeles, *The Problem of God*, 31.

the normal functioning of our brains. . . if something unusual catches our attention, or if we just focus our attention, we can ask and often answer the ‘why?’ question which our mind so easily arouses.”²³⁸

Conversely, out of nothing, nothing comes. Likewise, if a potential being is not preserved in existence by another, then it would immediately go out of existence. No matter how many potential beings there might be, all of them are unable to remain in existence without something actualizing them. To say that potential beings can exist without a cause is equivalent to holding that potential beings can come into existence out of nothing without a cause. But nothing is the complete absence of being; nothing has no causal power.

Every potential being is either self-caused, caused to exist by another, or uncaused. This tri-polar classification exhausts all of our options. Potential beings cannot cause themselves; they would have to precede themselves which is impossible. Neither can potential beings be uncaused. If they are uncaused, then they would be the ultimate ground of actual being. Nothing, however, can produce something. Hence we conclude that all potential beings must be caused by another. The type of causality involved in this view is conserving causality. It is concerned with the causes in the here-and-now, not with originating causes in the temporal sense of origination.

Premise 3: An infinite amount of potential beings (which have been caused by another) is not possible. A chain of causes where every potential being is preserved in existence by an actually infinite amount of other potential beings is impossible. Either the series of all potential beings is sufficient to account for itself or it is not. But the

²³⁸ John R. Shook, *The God Debates: A 21st Century Guide for Atheists and Believers (and Everyone in Between)* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 134.

series cannot account for itself. For if each being in the series of caused beings is itself caused, then adding all of them together will not alter the fact that each of them are still in need of a cause. If each part in the entire series of potential beings is potential, then the entire sum of these beings will still remain potential. If someone chooses to make the series longer, this will not make the sum of potential beings as a fully actual set of beings (or that they are able to account for themselves).

By saying that a potential being can account for some other potential existent is tantamount to saying that one paratrooper whose parachute does not open can prevent another paratrooper from falling to the ground (i.e., a paratrooper whose chute does not open either). When one adds paratroopers by grabbing ahold of other falling paratroopers (whose parachutes will also not open), this will only compound the problem, not lessen it. If there were no first cause then there would be no final effect. But there is an effect; therefore there cannot be an infinite regress.

No effect has within itself the power to cause something else. Rather, it is an actual being working in and through each potential being which causes them to be what they are.²³⁹ Arguing that an infinite amount of causes is possible is tantamount to saying that every single potential being has come from nothing, for not a single potential being has any real ground for its own existence, but depends on something else to account for it. The only being that can actualize another in a state of potentiality and actuality must be an actual being without potential. Only a being of pure actuality with no potential is capable of causing the existence of another.

²³⁹ Rowe misunderstands the Thomist cosmological argument by thinking there are *intermediate* causes. William L. Rowe, *The Cosmological Argument*, 4.

Conclusion: The only being which can cause a potential being in existence is an actual being. Therefore, at least one first actualizer exists. The first actualizer's essence is to exist. It is therefore uncaused. This conclusion follows logically and inescapably on the basis of each premise. We know that if something exists, then it must exist necessarily or it depends on something else for its existence. Something exists. This being is not a necessary existent. Its nonexistence is a real possibility. Its nonexistence, moreover, has already been (say, before it existed in the form it which it now appears). Conversely, an actual, necessary being has no potential for nonexistence; it cannot fail to exist. Because a potential being's nonexistence is a possibility, it exists potentially as a metaphysical composite of act and potency. It remains actual because it is. And it has potential for additional change. And we see it changing. Every being that is a composite of actuality and potentiality is caused to exist by another. So long as the regress does not immediately terminate in the existence of a purely actual being, we are left with a limited regress of causes. Therefore, a first actualizer must be responsible for sustaining each and every potential being in existence in the here and now.²⁴⁰ The nature of the first actualizer is different from all potential beings.

2d Conclusion: The nature of a first actualizer must be necessary, one, good, eternal, infinite, immaterial, simple, immutable, omnipresent, and omnipotent. Given the nature of the first actualizer, there cannot be more than one of them. The nature of this being is what all people mean when they speak of God. We might also add that this being is not sensible, for potential beings are known through human sense and the first

²⁴⁰ Douglas Krueger mistakenly believes that Aquinas is arguing for God's existence in the temporal sense of becoming. Unfortunately this leads him to maintain that the first cause does not give enough reason to believe that *it still exists*. Of course, this simple mistake misses the central point of the argument. See Douglas E. Krueger, *What is Atheism?* (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1998), 147. See also Peter Angeles, *The Problem of God*, 43.

actualizer is only known by negating what is already known about potential beings. This conclusion, says Aquinas, is what *all* people mean when they speak of God. Since a purely actual being has no potential, it cannot change; it is immutable.

Moreover, the necessary uncaused cause must be nonspatial (infinite) and atemporal (eternal). Since time and space involve a change of position and time, an actual being cannot exist in space or time. It lies beyond spacetime and thus properly transcends both of them. According to Graham Oppy, “If the existence of the physical universe depends upon something else, then—at the very least—there are possible worlds in which there is no physical universe because that something else is different in some way. Moreover, if there is neither space nor time ‘beyond’ the physical universe, then the ‘something else’ upon which the existence of the physical universe depends can be neither spatial nor temporal.”²⁴¹ Though Oppy invokes a necessary existent as responsible for the preservation of potential beings, he does not think it is God. Nonetheless, his point is well taken. Everitt seems to agree: “The only way in which the resort to a creator will block an infinite regress of super-creator, super-super-creator, and so on, is if the creator can have a different *kind* of existence from the universe.”²⁴²

A necessary being must also be indivisible, or simple. If the necessary, unchanging, timeless, and spaceless being were composed of parts, then it would be capable of decomposition. But an actual existent does not have any potential for anything, including decomposition. We conclude: a pure, actual being must be utterly simple. A being that is pure actuality must also be infinite in power. Having the power to keep things in a state of potential existence, it can have no limitation in any respect.

²⁴¹ Graham Oppy, *Arguing About Gods*, 106.

²⁴² Nicholas Everitt, *The Non-Existence of God*, 71.

Therefore the actual being must be infinite in power. A necessary existent is uncaused; its essence is to exist. The fact that essence and existence converge also provides support for its simplicity. All other beings (i.e., potential beings) have existence. They must therefore participate in the existence of the actual being. Without the actual being, all potential beings could not exist and be what they currently are.

Lastly, an actual existent must be good. Nonexistence is not good or evil, for it is not. But if something exists, then it is good.²⁴³ Goodness and existence are convertible categories in Thomistic metaphysics. If something exists, then this is a good quality, not an evil one. In this way, existence is a good and nonexistence cannot be classified as anything. So it does not make sense to say that if an actual being without potential exists, then it might be, as Stephen Law puts it, an evil being.²⁴⁴ Oppy is also incorrect when he says that the most that could be concluded about the argument is that a first actualizer exists—a first cause that is “not itself in a process of change.”²⁴⁵

Let us turn to the most salient atheist criticisms (and provide a brief response to each of them from the post-Vatican II Thomist literature). Again, the point is to highlight the atheist criticisms and discuss the responses currently given by Thomistic theists. One might interpret the following section as a bibliographical appraisal of the theism-atheism debate from a Thomist perspective.

Thomas Aquinas Models Reality Arbitrarily

²⁴³ For more on this, see D.J. Hawkins, “Value and Value Judgments,” in *Being and Becoming*, (London: Sheed and Ward, 1954); Scott MacDonald, ed., *Being and Goodness: The Concept of the Good in Metaphysics and Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1990).

²⁴⁴ Stephen Law, “Could it Be *Pretty Obvious* There’s No God?,” in Russell Blackford and Udo Schüklenk, ed., *50 Voices of Disbelief: Why We Are Atheists* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), 134-138.

²⁴⁵ Graham Oppy, *Arguing About Gods*, 103.

Some have argued that the way Thomists model reality is arbitrary, a loaded metaphysics which is not necessary. Reality can be explained and described from other legitimate perspectives. George Smith, for instance, claims that the categories of contingent and necessary are arbitrary (thus the Thomistic argument are “drenched in medieval metaphysics,” as he puts it) and so must be successfully argued for if the argument is to succeed.²⁴⁶ Be that as it may, Thomists argue that the object which exists must either be a potential being or an actual being. Philosophically speaking, this exhausts all of our options. As Jacques Maritain once put it:

in order to recognize in the philosophic proofs of the existence of God, notably in the five ways of St. Thomas, their full demonstrative value, it is not necessary to be a philosopher trained in the school of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, nor even to be a philosopher by profession. What is prerequisite is to perceive and adhere firmly to the primary truths which Thomist philosophy attempts more successfully than any other to justify. . . But in the East as in the West it is by no means the only philosophy to recognize and to cultivate these primary truths. Indeed, the very fact of their primacy prevents them from being the monopoly of any one system; they precede every system. They are part and parcel of what has been called the natural philosophy of the human intelligence. . . They are grasped by common sense before being the object of philosophic consideration.²⁴⁷

There is no third category of being other than a potential or actual being. Neither is there such a thing as sheer potentiality. Sheer potentiality is not actual, but is the mere capacity for something to actually exist in a certain way. Only potential beings and an actual being exist. Or, just an actual being exists. There is no other option.²⁴⁸ This model is derived from undeniable human experience. We do not superimpose the categories of potentiality and actuality onto reality. These categories describe the world in the way it really exists.

²⁴⁶ George H. Smith, *Atheism: The Case Against God* (Amherst: Prometheus, 1989), 251. See also Antony Flew, *God and Philosophy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1966), 91.

²⁴⁷ Jacques Maritain, *Approaches to God*, trans. Peter O'Reilly (New York: Harpers & Brothers, 1954), 16-18. See also 18 ff.

²⁴⁸ Benedict M. Ashley, *The Way Toward Wisdom: An Interdisciplinary and Intercultural Introduction to Metaphysics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2009); W. Norris Clarke, *The One and the Many: A Contemporary Thomistic Metaphysics*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2001); John F. Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 2000).

Petitio Principii and the First Premise

Another response to the first premise (and/or second premise) is that it begs the question in favor of God's existence.²⁴⁹ But this argument is philosophically naïve. If such an objection implies intuitively that if something exists then God must exist, then the objector recognizes the soundness of the proof, and it would be a quick short-cut through the argument. Such an intuition would make the point of the argument without going through the sequence of each premise.

But if the objector means that the argument cannot be made unless the natural theologian was already convinced in her mind that there is a God before she even sits down to lay out the premises of the argument, then we must admit that this is psychologically true. Nobody formulates an argument unless they intend on demonstrating the likelihood of a conclusion. But this should not be considered a case of circular reasoning because nowhere in the first and/or second premise does it state that God exists.

Potential Beings Can Exist Uncaused

Atheists argue that there is no reason to exclude the possibility that potential beings always exist. Potential beings are sometimes uncaused. This kind of reasoning is widespread in the atheist literature.²⁵⁰ Writing boldly on behalf of the atheist community,

²⁴⁹ B.C. Johnson, *The Atheist Debator's Handbook* (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1981), 62; Peter Angeles, *The Problem of God*, 43.

²⁵⁰ Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1990), 100, 119, 120; J.L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, 88; B.C. Johnson, *The Atheist Debator's Handbook*, 68; Antony Flew, *Atheistic Humanism*, (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1993), 45, 46; George H. Smith, *Atheism: The Case Against God*, 251; Graham Oppy, *Arguing About Gods*, 103-105; William L. Rowe, *The*

J.L. Mackie wrote: “Why, for example, might there not be a permanent stock of matter whose essence did not involve existence but which did not derive its existence from anything else?”²⁵¹

With respect to the possibility that uncaused contingent beings might exist because they are at least “conceivable,”²⁵² a few responses have been recently given. John Shepherd illuminates various ways in which contingency can be understood, and concludes that the term does not function as a proposition, but as a statement about existence.²⁵³ Bruce Reichenbach agrees with him, noting that the conception of a causeless, potential being is empty.²⁵⁴

In some sense it is at least conceivable that married bachelors or square circles exist, but this conception cannot be a substitute for the actual reality of such things. Can square circles actually exist? Atheists need to answer these questions successfully. Though it may be possible to *psychologically conceive* of an uncaused potential existent, it remains *metaphysically impossible* for potential beings to exist without a cause. Norris Clarke contends that in order for beings to be potential and actual, they would have to exist and not exist in the same time in the same sense. Of course, this is impossible.²⁵⁵ Stephen Davis argues that it may be possible in the Thomist argument for potential

Cosmological Argument, 42, 45; Houston Craighead, “The Cosmological Argument: Assessment of a Reassessment,” *International Journal of Philosophy of Religion*, 6 (1975), 117-124.

²⁵¹ J.L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, 91.

²⁵² For J.L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, 89, it “concerns the premiss that ‘what does not exist cannot begin to be except through something that is.’ This is, of course, a form of the principle that nothing can come from nothing; the idea then is that if our series of impermanent things had broken off, it could never have started again after a gap. But is this an *a priori* truth? As Hume pointed out, we can certainly conceive an uncaused beginning to be of an object; if what we can thus conceive is nevertheless impossible, this still requires to be shown.”

²⁵³ John Shepherd, *Experience, Inference and God*, (London: MacMillan, 1975).

²⁵⁴ Bruce Reichenbach, “The Cosmological Argument and the Causal Principle,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 6 (1975): 185-190.

²⁵⁵ W. Norris Clarke, “Natural Theology Today,” in Robert Russell, William Stoeger, and George Coyne, eds., *Physics, Philosophy, and Theology: Quest for Understanding* (Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory, 1988), 80-123.

beings to exist forever in the past (and into the future), but this would not mean that an actual being (without potential) is not ultimately responsible for currently causing them to exist.²⁵⁶

Aquinas himself addresses this criticism when he describes the nature of potential beings. Whatever changes from a state of potential for the change in question to the new state in which it becomes must have an external cause that precedes it in being (not in temporal succession). All potential beings have act (existence) and potential (essence). Existence as such is unlimited. If potential beings did not have act and potency, then they would have to be annihilated and then recreated from nothing, which would be impossible without a cause. No potential in limited, potential beings can actualize itself any more than the potential for cotton to become a t-shirt can actualize itself into that t-shirt without an external cause. An actual existent with no potential does not have limited qualities, for it has no potential for anything. If it had potential for something, then it would be, by definition, limited. Thus a potential being must be caused by another.

The Causal Principle is an Illusion

The next criticism is a recurring atheist criticism. Although Michael Martin accepts the threefold categorization concerning existential causality (i.e., potential beings are either caused by another, uncaused, or self-caused), he quickly adds that the principle might be an illusion: “One can look upon the causal principle not as metaphysical truth to be believed but as a principle of inquiry that is useful to follow. On this view, if we act *as if* the principle is true whether we believe in it or not, then if there is a cause to be

²⁵⁶ Stephen T. Davis, *God, Reason and Theistic Proofs* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 70-73.

discovered we have a chance of discovering it. On the other hand, if we do not so act, we stand no chance.”²⁵⁷ He thus insists that the principal is assumed—and so must be rejected until proven otherwise.

Yet Thomas’ argument is not based on empirical observation, but on metaphysical necessity.²⁵⁸ Causality is not based on conceptual (or definitional) necessity as in the Leibnizian cosmological argument, which is based on the principle of sufficient reason, but is based on the undeniable existential insight that nothing cannot bring something into existence without a cause.²⁵⁹ As atheist philosopher J.J.C. Smart rightly acknowledges, the Humean critique of causality has no relevance to the Thomist argument.²⁶⁰ Non-being has no potential for anything. Out of nothing, nothing comes. If a potential being exists, then it must be caused to exist by another. The only kind of being that is not caused by another is an uncaused being. Since an actual being is not the same thing as a potential being, the latter must have a cause.

Some atheists do not dispute the Thomistic approach of existential causality. No less a critic of theism than Graham Oppy says: “it seems quite uncontroversial to accept that some things have causes.”²⁶¹ Despite J.L. Mackie’s other misgivings, he agrees that the principal of existential causality “has some plausibility, in that it is constantly confirmed in our experience (and also used, reasonably, in interpreting our

²⁵⁷ Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification*, 120, 121. By way of contrast, Hume never denied the principle of causality: “I never asserted so absurd a proposition as that anything might arise without a cause.” Taken from David Hume, *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J.Y.T. Greig, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1932), 1:187.

²⁵⁸ Some critiques of Humean concerns about causality (which do not apply to the Thomist argument) include John Caputo, “Kant’s Refutation of the Cosmological Argument,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 42 (1974): 686-691; Joseph Campbell, “Hume’s Refutation of the Cosmological Argument,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 40 (1996): 159-173; Gerald Hughes, *The Nature of God* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

²⁵⁹ For an overview of this distinction, see John Edwin Gurr, *The Principle of Sufficient Reason in Some Scholastic Systems: 1750-1900* (Milwaukee: Marquette University, 1959).

²⁶⁰ J.J. C. Smart and John Haldane, *Atheism and Theism*, pp. 163, 164.

²⁶¹ Graham Oppy, *Arguing About Gods*, 100.

experience).”²⁶² Conversely, it might be argued that if the causal premise were not true, then we would expect to see objects pop into existence from nothing and then vanish back to nothing without a cause.²⁶³

Still others maintain that Thomists need to explain *how* the purely actual being causes potential beings, not merely assert *that* the former is causally responsible for them.²⁶⁴ Since we cannot grasp what an actual being (i.e., an actual existent without potential) is, but only what it is not, we must admit that we cannot know *how* it might cause/preserve potential being. However, there is something right and wrong about this objection. We know *that* the cause has certain attributes, but we cannot comprehend *how* he exists, let alone how it actualizes potential beings. Yet we know *that* this must be the case.

How does created reality remain in existence through the power of pure act? Such a question seems impossible to answer in any comprehensible manner. We can *apprehend* the change in causality, but not *comprehend* it. Because the preservation of created realities is a spaceless and timeless act, the actual being’s relation with the world is utterly unique. Thus we are unable to think of any adequate analogies by which to suggest *how* it sustains potential being. If the sustainable universe is the result of the Actualizer’s continuously free decision, then his act cannot be subject to the same kind of determinacy that potential beings are subject to. The asymmetric character of the relation between the Actualizer and potential being simply cannot be emphasized enough.

Potential Beings Can Come From Nothing

²⁶² J.L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, 89.

²⁶³ J.J. C. Smart and John Haldane, *Atheism and Theism*, 124, 125.

²⁶⁴ Nicholas Everitt, *The Non-Existence of God*, 75; Peter Angeles, *The Problem of God*, 43.

Some atheists have argued that potential beings can pop into being from nothing without a cause.²⁶⁵ Michael Martin urges that scientific notions might account for this phenomenon.²⁶⁶ “The supposition that . . . that there could not be something brought into existence by nothing is by no means self-evident. At least, given the biblical authority of the book of Genesis, where God created the world out of nothing, it should not have seemed so to Aquinas. For if God could create the world out of nothing, one might suppose that something could be spontaneously generated out of nothing without God’s help.”²⁶⁷ One way to think of something coming from nothing is by understanding the role of quantum mechanics.²⁶⁸ Although these criticisms are often directed against the *Kalām* argument, they are sometimes cast against the Thomist version as well.

However, the sub-atomic world is not equivalent to nothing, but is something—a vibrant field of sub-atomic energy. Moreover, Martin’s suggestion that God creates “by nothing” is multiply confused. The phrase “creation out of nothing” is not meant to convey that something can be created by nothing, but that something can be created after nothing. After nothing, a state of something exists. Things can be created (i.e., preserved) *out of* nothing, which is reliant on an efficient cause, but not *by* nothing. Creation out of nothing simply denotes a movement of a state of nothingness to a state of something. It does not imply that nothing is a state of existence out of which God creates (*de nihilo ipso*); God does not start things off (or keeps things in existence) by manipulating a peculiar kind of stuff known as “nothing.”

²⁶⁵ Graham Oppy, *Arguing About Gods*, 105. Oppy seems to believe that limited things can come out of nothing without a cause.

²⁶⁶ Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification*, 100. See also J.J. C. Smart and John Haldane, *Atheism and Theism*, 124, 125.

²⁶⁷ Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification*, 100.

²⁶⁸ Nicholas Everitt, *The Non-Existence of God*, 70.

Moreover, the “something” at the quantum field level is operated by some kind of regulative law. Even if all possibilities can be realized in a chance world, there would have to be some deeper law under which quantum particles can fluctuate or further actualize themselves. At this level we are doing metaphysics, however, not science. Physicists, moreover, have typically used the word “nothing” in a variety of ways. Sometimes the word is used in the sense of non-being. When they speak about “nothing” in this sense, then they pour the same meaning into the word that Thomists do.

Absolute nothingness has no potential for anything, let alone for some-thing. Nothing is not some-thing. To argue that something can remain into existence from nothing without a cause requires a denial of the law of non-contradiction (A cannot be A and non-A at the same time and in the same relationship). For something to come from nothing it must precede and then create itself. But this is logically impossible. In order for something to come from nothing without a cause, the potential being would have to exist before it exists. But this is clearly impossible; there must be a cause.

“Chance” Explains the Second Premise

Still other atheists claim the causal premise is dubious because there are “chancy processes”²⁶⁹ at work. Chance can refer to an event which is incapable of being predicted by persons in advance. Events of this sort are due to ignorance of all causal factors involved. A tsunami that kills millions of people might seem like a chance event to innocent bystanders, but if scientists had all the relevant knowledge required to predict its occurrence, then we would indeed be able to save lives before the tragedy happens. A second meaning of chance stems from the intersecting lines of different causal chains.

²⁶⁹ Graham Oppy, *Arguing About Gods*, 103.

Sometimes when two forces collide an unforeseen consequence occurs and we call it a chance event. This is precisely what happens in natural selection. Third, we can also speak of chance in quantum physics. At this level, scientists speak in cautious terms, usually in terms of probabilities rather than strict cause-effect relations.

None of these of these examples overthrow the truth of existential causality. In each case there are antecedent causes needed for an effect. Some take chance as that which happens spontaneously without a cause, but it is impossible to ascribe chance with a power to do anything. There is simply no such thing as a chance cause. “Chance” is merely a word to cover up our ignorance.²⁷⁰ To say otherwise is to invoke magic. Even in the case of quantum indeterminacy, a cause is still at work. As R.J. Russell avers: “We speak of this kind of chance when we do not know, or prefer to ignore, the underlying causal factors—while believing they are there in principle. We could in principle give a complete causal—i.e., deterministic—description of natural processes from the cells to galaxies; we chose a statistical description merely out of convenience.”²⁷¹ Indeed, these scientific disputations simply have no bearing on Aquinas’ natural theology.

Thomistic Natural Theology is Based on Outdated (Medieval) Science

Some Thomists have been accused of presupposing an antiquated scientific view of the world. As Anthony Kenny memorably said, Aquinas’ arguments depend on his false medieval view of the world.²⁷² As such, Aquinas’ arguments cannot be trusted because of this obvious flaw. Others have assumed the same stance as Kenny. Mortimer

²⁷⁰ Stanley Jaki, *God and the Cosmologists*, (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic, 1989), 142-169.

²⁷¹ Robert John Russell, “Does the “God Who Acts” Really Act in Nature?”, in Ted Peters, ed., *Science and Theology: The New Consonance* (Boulder: Westview, 1998), 85.

²⁷² Anthony Kenny, *The Five Ways* (New York: Routledge and K. Paul, 1969); idem, *The God of the Philosophers* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979).

Adler explained that the soundness of Thomist arguments depends on Aquinas' faulty medievalism.²⁷³ Of course, Mackie picked up on this line of criticism and also claimed that the argument rests on a false scientific view of the world.²⁷⁴ For him this explains why the argument is not of interest to theologians anymore.

Many Thomists contend that such disputations are irrelevant to Aquinas' argument. Robert Koons argues that no scientific paradigm—that is, the indeterminism of the wave collapse, the Bell inequality theorems, or other features of quantum mechanics—can serve to undercut the causal principle of most cosmological arguments.²⁷⁵ According to Brian Davies, Thomas' argument is a metaphysical argument, not a scientific one.²⁷⁶ For him the success of the argument does not depend on any scientific picture of the world.²⁷⁷ William Rowe, who has been a critic of theism for years, agrees with Davies about the science issue.²⁷⁸ Fogelin responds directly to Kenny and argues that until arguments are presented (and not assertions), Aquinas' arguments can continue to be endorsed.²⁷⁹

The science only applies in the case of Aquinas' *use of illustrations*, not in the arguments *per se*. Science does not determine the truth of the premises, and Aquinas was well aware of this. Thus the “argument from bad science” can now be laid to rest; for it

²⁷³ Mortimer Adler, *How to Think About God* (New York: MacMillan, 1980).

²⁷⁴ J.L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, 87.

²⁷⁵ Robert Koons, “A New Look at the Cosmological Argument,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 34 (1997): 193-211.

²⁷⁶ Brian Davies, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University, 2004), 64.

²⁷⁷ For additional confirmation of this point, see J.J. C. Smart and John Haldane, *Atheism and Theism*, 36, 37.

²⁷⁸ William L. Rowe, *The Cosmological Argument*, 15. Because some scientific thought experiments would be disanalogous in serving to illustrate Aquinas' use of the principle of existential causality, Rowe prematurely concludes that the principle must be sitting on shaky ground. Yet, Rowe should recognize that the principle is not a scientific principle, but a metaphysical one (*ex nihilo nihil fit*).

²⁷⁹ Robert Fogelin, “A Reading of Aquinas' Five Ways,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 27 (1990): 305-313.

does not understand the point of Aquinas' argument. The use of erroneous scientific illustrations simply does not detract from what is first and foremost a metaphysical argument. As Antony Flew himself once said: "Once it is appreciated, with some difficulty, that none of this is even supposed to apply to causes in the ordinary temporal succession it will become clear that this argument . . . is safely beyond the reach of science."²⁸⁰ Indeed, the idea that the Thomist argument is based on an outdated scientific picture of the world seems to smack of a soft *ad hominem* attack on theists.

Issues Related to Infinite Regresses

B.C. Johnson offers a criticism of the third premise: "Compare a row of dominoes endlessly long . . . which has always been toppling a domino at a time. One could ask what began the dominoes' movement in the first place. But this is just to assume that there was a first place."²⁸¹ Thus atheists argue that theists assume the first member of the causal series.

However, the argument does not depend on a question begging argument in support of limited regresses. Aquinas' allows for the possibility of an infinite regress in the temporal sense of becoming, but this would not become an excuse to ask about why the series itself exists. In this way, says Brian Davies, objectors miss the point of the argument.²⁸² There can be no chain of intermediary causes in between the ultimate

²⁸⁰ Antony Flew, *God and Philosophy*, 88.

²⁸¹ B.C. Johnson, *The Atheist Debator's Handbook*, 69. See also Nicholas Everitt, *The Non-Existence of God*, 66; Graham Oppy, *Arguing About Gods*, 103; Jordan Howard Sobel, *Logic and Theism*, 183. William L. Rowe, *The Cosmological Argument*, 18, 22, 32, 37; Paul Edwards, "The Cosmological Argument," 45, 46.

²⁸² Brian Davies, *Thinking About God* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1985), 23, 24.

causer and potential beings. Hence, it is unnecessary to claim that theists beg the question in support of a finite regress.

More atheists would rather argue for the possibility of an infinite regress.²⁸³ Mackie uses an illustration where an infinite regress would be possible: *endless motion around a circle*.²⁸⁴

Now, this illustration might give insight into the nature of what an infinite regresses actually is, but it is no substitute for philosophical argument. The circle must have already been drawn or created *within a contingent universe to begin with*. So it does not help the atheist to posit these illustrations when they are dis-analogous to the metaphysical problem at hand.

Hence pseudo-examples of infinities can at most count as a potential infinite, not an actual infinity in the hierarchical structure of the real, concrete world. Some anti-theists respond: mathematics is known to have actual infinities. Two distinctions need to be made in response to this challenge. First, there is a difference between mathematical and concrete infinities. The former is theoretical and has no place in the real, concrete world; but actual infinities cannot exist in the real world. Second, there is a difference between actual infinities and potential infinities. Potential infinities are always reaching toward actual infinity, but never able to actually reach it. An actually infinite existence cannot be added to or subtracted from.

²⁸³ Wallace Matson, *The Existence of God* (New York: Cornell University, 1965), 60; Douglas E. Krueger, *What is Atheism?*, 149, 150; Peter Angeles, *The Problem of God*, 77-79; Paul Edwards, "The Cosmological Argument," 45, 46, 50, 57; Kai Nielson, *Philosophy and Atheism* (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1985), 44, 45; idem, *Reason and Practice* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 171; Jordan Howard Sobel, *Logic and Theism*, 181; Richard M. Gale, "The Failure of Classical Theistic Arguments," 92; Nicholas Everitt, *The Non-Existence of God*, 67; William L. Rowe, *The Cosmological Argument*, 35, 36, and J.L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, 90; B.C. Johnson, *The Atheist Debator's Handbook*, 69.

²⁸⁴ J.L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, 90. See also Graham Oppy, *Arguing About Gods*, 99, 100; Richard M. Gale, "The Failure of Classical Theistic Arguments," 91.

No matter which way potential beings come in and out of existence, the series must come to a stop in the here-and-now.²⁸⁵ Thomas refers to essentially ordered causes of potential *beings*, not change as such. The only kind of being that can keep the series of hierarchical, concurrent causes going is a purely actual being that has no potential for change and, by extension, for nonexistence. Since each member of the series is caused to be, the entire series must have a cause. It is in the very nature of the case that if all of the members in the series are caused, then each one of them needs to be caused.²⁸⁶ However, Aquinas allows for the possibility of *per accidens* infinite regresses, not a causal series *per se*.²⁸⁷ All potential beings are *caused* beings by nature; but they are not *causing* beings. Because their own existence is received by another, they have no existence to give to another. Thus the need for a first cause follows from the fact that each member in the series, composed by definition of potency and act, has no causal power. Extending the series backward in the here-and-now would not alter the fact that an uncaused cause is needed to preserve each of them in existence. We need to be careful about what kind of series is being exploited.

“In all our experience,” Everitt concedes, “chains are *always* of finite length, and if they are suspended vertically, they are *always* supported by something that is not itself a chain or another link in a chain. A chain might be hanging from a nail in the wall, it

²⁸⁵ Joseph Owens, “Aquinas on Infinite Regress,” *Mind*, 71.2 (1962): 244-246; James Sadowsky, “The Cosmological Argument and the Endless Regress,” *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 20 (1980): 465-467; Patterson Brown, “Infinite Causal Regression,” *Philosophical Review*, 75.3 (1996): 510-525. See also Norman Kretzmann’s discussion in “Aquinas’s Disguised Cosmological Argument,” in Jeff Jordan and Daniel Howard Snyder, eds., *Faith, Freedom, and Rationality: Philosophy of Religion Today* (Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield, 1996), 185-204.

²⁸⁶ Bruce Reichenbach, *The Cosmological Argument: A Reassessment* (Springfield IL, Charles C. Thomas, 1972), 97-102.

²⁸⁷ Recognized by Paul Edwards, “The Cosmological Argument,” 46-49.

might be held aloft by a person, and so on.”²⁸⁸ Whereas common sense leads one to accept a limited amount of potential beings, infinite regresses are counterintuitive. Until atheists can argue for the infinite regress (and not merely provide an psychologically based illustrations), then it does not seem that the infinite regress should be accepted. For them the infinite series is, counterintuitively speaking, a “brute fact.”²⁸⁹

The Universe is the First Actualizer

Still other atheists argue that even if certain beings are potential, the fundamental elements of the universe are necessary. “For all we know,” says Johnson, “the ultimate sub-atomic particles which compose the universe just exist, being dependent on nothing.”²⁹⁰

Notice that there is no denial of a first uncaused actualizer in his claim. In fact it is endorsed by Johnson. As Douglas Krueger rightly points out, Aquinas’ argument leads one to accept that a first actualizer exists (though he believes that the first actualizer is the universe).²⁹¹ More importantly, the first cause exists outside the sphere of potential beings; it alone is responsible for the here-and-now existence of potential beings. Therefore the first actualizer is not another potential being. While accepting each of the previous premises, they conclude that the actual being is the universe itself. To be shown in the second part of the conclusion of the argument, the attributes of the first actualizer resemble God more than physical reality.

²⁸⁸ Nicholas Everitt, *The Non-Existence of God*, 67.

²⁸⁹ William Rowe, *The Cosmological Argument*, 35, 36.

²⁹⁰ B.C. Johnson, *The Atheist Debator’s Handbook*, 64. See also Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification*, 100; George H. Smith, *Atheism: The Case Against God*, 247. See also B.C. Johnson, *The Atheist Debator’s Handbook*, 69; Paul Edwards, “The Cosmological Argument,” 45, 49, 56. See also J.J. C. Smart and John Haldane, *Atheism and Theism*, 163. Douglas E. Krueger, *What is Atheism?*, 147, 148, 151, 152; Peter Angeles, *The Problem of God*, 75, 76.

²⁹¹ Douglas E. Krueger, *What is Atheism?*, 147. See also Peter Angeles, *The Problem of God*, 43.

Other atheists, such as Wallace Matson,²⁹² Peter Angeles,²⁹³ and Robin Le Poidevin,²⁹⁴ argue differently. For them a cause only applies within the sphere of time and space. They argue: if ‘God’ is considered the cause of all potential beings, then he must be another spatiotemporal existent. And if this is what the Thomist argument amounts to, then obviously God is no different than any potential being within the universe. Despite the commonsense appeal of Aquinas, Everitt evades the problem and concludes that deeper reality is unknowable: “Our background expectations about the nature of physical chains of links are therefore very different from our background assumptions about causes in general, and we cannot assume that what seems obvious with the former will also apply to the latter.”²⁹⁵

But these objections do not amount to much; for they do not apply to Aquinas’ natural theology. As Robert Koons states, the premises and the conclusion use the concept of cause within the time-space continuum, but at the conclusion they are negated. Because an actually infinite amount of essentially hierarchical, sustaining causes is impossible, we have no choice but to resort to a cause that is itself uncaused. Otherwise we are left with another limited being. Or, we are left with every potential thing coming into existence from nothing *sans* a cause.

What Caused God?

²⁹² Wallace Matson, *The Existence of God*, 56-86.

²⁹³ Peter Angeles, *The Problem of God*, 42.

²⁹⁴ Robin Le Poidevin, “Creation in a Closed Universe,” *Religious Studies*, 27 (1991): 39-48.

²⁹⁵ Nicholas Everitt, *The Non-Existence of God*, 67.

Richard Dawkins holds that Aquinas “makes the entirely unwarranted assumption that God himself is immune to the regress.”²⁹⁶

But the never-ending question of asking “who or what caused God?” is surely guided by either the atheist’s refusal to accept the impossibility of an infinite regress or because of a false understanding of existential causality. Unlike the Leibnizian principle of sufficient reason, the causal principle of Aquinas is not that “everything must have a cause.” Rather, every potential being must have a cause (or, every finite, limited, changing being must have a cause). As Angeles rightly said: “If God is eternal, then He is uncaused. It would be silly then to ask ‘What caused God?’”²⁹⁷

What is more, the question “Who made God?” commits what might be called the “category fallacy.” It eliminates from the outset any possibility that the ultimate explanation of potential beings might be an actual being, or a theistic God. It is like asking “who caused the being who is, by definition, uncaused?” As a result, Thomistic theists have not given much attention to this objection.

Premise Three Commits the Compositional Fallacy

Peter Angeles²⁹⁸ and Michael Martin have argued that although a finite, changing being might need a cause, it would be fallacious to then argue that all potential taken as a whole would need a cause: “the argument seems to commit the fallacy of composition. Just because each thing is capable of not existing, it is not obvious that the totality would

²⁹⁶ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 2006), 100. See also John Shook, *The God Debates*, 134, 135; Wallace Matson, *The Existence of God*, 61.

²⁹⁷ Peter Angeles, *The Problem of God*, 27. See also John Shook, *The God Debates*, 135.

²⁹⁸ Peter Angeles, *The Problem of God*, 33-37.

be capable of not existing.”²⁹⁹ Thus they charge Thomistic theists with committing the fallacy of composition. Just because each potential being is caused, they say, it would not follow that all of them together would need a cause.³⁰⁰ In this fallacy one illicitly argues that each part will also apply to the collection of the whole.

The compositional fallacy is an informal fallacy. That means that the fallacy does not always apply in every scenario. Sometimes square tiles will not always make a square shaped floor. Sometimes it will be rectangular instead. But sometimes each of the tiles will be a large square shaped floor. Hence, the fallacy needs to be considered on a case-by-case basis.³⁰¹ Atheists allege that when Thomists argue that since every potential existent is caused, therefore the universe is caused, they are committing this fallacy.

Now Thomists might say that although many potential objects exist, this remains irrelevant to the success of the argument. The existence of *one* potential being is sufficient condition for demonstrating the existence of God (regardless if there are other potential beings or not). So long as one accepts Aquinas’ essence-existence distinction, then one does not need to entertain the atheists’ allegations about the compositional fallacy. Perhaps the discussion at this point should turn to the legitimacy of the essence-existence distinction instead. Against George Smith,³⁰² John Haldane points out that because Thomas’ arguments are not concerned about temporal succession (meaning that

²⁹⁹ Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification*, 100. See also B.C. Johnson, *The Atheist Debater’s Handbook*, 62.

³⁰⁰ Some theists argue for the potentiality of the whole and then argue to God’s existence. Robert Koons, “A New Look at the Cosmological Argument,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 34 (1997): 193-211.

³⁰¹ Peter Angeles, *The Problem of God*, 32, 33. See also William Rowe, “The Fallacy of Composition,” *Mind*, 71 (1962): 281-289.

³⁰² George H. Smith, *Atheism: The Case Against God*, 250. Since “we do not observe the creation or annihilation of matter, so the claim that the universe as a whole is contingent cannot be supported by factual evidence.”

Aquinas is not so concerned to show that if we had enough time, all potential beings would eventually disappear). Time only functions within the greater context of contingency.³⁰³

Aquinas is not so much concerned with arguing for the cause of the entire whole in the sense of becoming, but for the cause of any potential being.³⁰⁴ He is not saying that because one potential being exists, the whole universe must be potential. The point is that as long as there is one potential being, then there must be a unique being whose essence is to exist. The aggregate collection of potential beings does not leave the critic with saying Thomas commits the compositional fallacy, and it also misses the thrust of the argument altogether.

Premise Four Commits the Quantifier Shift Fallacy

Antony Flew once said that the quantifier shift fallacy “is committed more than once in the Five Ways.”³⁰⁵ His reasoning is as follows. The second premise holds that potential beings are preserved/caused by another. But the conclusion says that there is a First Cause of potential beings. The quantifier shift fallacy says that going from things being caused to a cause of things is fallacious. Just because each potential being has a cause, it does not follow that there is a single cause of all potential beings.

Several things have been said in response to this criticism. When the Five Ways are understood within the underlying existence-essence distinction, the unity of the cause inevitably follows. The first actualizer cannot be limited by potentiality. If it was limited

³⁰³ J.J. C. Smart and John Haldane, *Atheism and Theism*, 119.

³⁰⁴ Stephen T. Davis, *God, Reason and Theistic Proofs*, 60-77.

³⁰⁵ Antony Flew, ed. *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd ed., (New York: St. Martins, 1984), 296. See also J.J. C. Smart and John Haldane, *Atheism and Theism*, 118, 119.

by potentiality, then it would need a cause too. For every existent that is limited by potentiality is, by definition, caused by another.

Second, Thomas' argument does not suggest that each thing has a cause in the same exact way. Taking the cause in one sense, Thomas is not actually arguing for the conclusion in the same exact sense of the second premise. Once the conclusion is reached, the attributes are discovered through a different form of argument: negation. Thus the term “cause” does not necessarily mean finite or infinite cause. It means a necessary and sufficient condition needed for the existence of potential existents. Thus there is no equivocation in the term “cause” in the premises and in the conclusion. The conclusion is a necessary inference given the nature of the argument. The *via negativa* does not leave us with absolute nothingness. The first actualizer is demanded given the nature of what a potential being is.

Not Enough Attributes of the First Actualizer to Consider it “God”

Atheists have argued that even if theologians could prove a first actual being, this would not mean it is God.³⁰⁶ Atheists insist that unless most or all or most the divine attributes can be demonstrated, then the first actualizer cannot be equated with a theistic God.

In response to this challenge, Thomists have relied on the distinction between the formal and material objects of knowledge. Persons can recognize the same object in

³⁰⁶ Paul Edwards, “The Cosmological Argument,” 45. See also Matson, *The Existence of God*, 57, who says we may conclude it is a deity, but not God! Other examples would include Douglas E. Krueger, *What is Atheism?*, 147-149; Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification*, 118; George H. Smith, *Atheism: The Case Against God*, 244; Peter Angeles, *The Problem of God*, 43; J.L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, 91, 92; Nicholas Everitt, *The Non-Existence of God*, 75; Walter Kaufman, *Critique of Religion and Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday, 1958); Antony Flew, *God and Philosophy*; Robin LePoidevin, *Arguing for Atheism: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 100; William L. Rowe, *The Cosmological Argument*, 5.

different formal respects. The philosopher's God is the same God as the God worshipped by Christians, but the philosopher's God cannot be known *as* the God of Christianity until she begins to have faith *in* Christ. Philosophy can only bring one to accept some (or even most) of the attributes of God.

Notwithstanding the familiar distinction between faith and reason, many attributes flow directly from Aquinas' argument. The attributes come cascading down one after another once a being of pure act is shown to exist. Since existence as such is unlimited unless conjoined with a limiting essence, then a being whose essence is existence will exemplify *all* perfections infinitely. God will be infinite in his goodness, knowledge and power, as well as other attributes.

Once the essence of the argument is understood, the final conclusion can be extended by additional arguments to demonstrate that it must be one, simple, immaterial, immutable, omnipotent, etc. Shepherd concludes that a "Cosmic-Explaining-Being"³⁰⁷ is the cause of Aristotelian-Thomistic arguments. By extension he demonstrates that by definition it must have additional properties: perfection, creator, sustainer, etc. If the first cause's essence is to exist, then it contains all the perfections that there can be. As Thomas goes on to say very soon after the Five Ways, "All perfections existing in creatures divided and multiplied, pre-exist in God unitedly."³⁰⁸

George Smith retorts: "the concept of causality makes sense only within the context of the natural universe, and to demand a cause of the universe is nonsensical."³⁰⁹ In one sense Smith is right: the first actual being lies outside the purview sense experience. When one examines the nature of the first actualizer, it is evident that the

³⁰⁷ John Shepherd, *Experience, Inference and God*.

³⁰⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, 13, 5.

³⁰⁹ George H. Smith, *Atheism: The Case Against God*, 247.

physical universe does not match that description (for some of the attributes include infinity, eternality, and omnipotence, which would imply immateriality).

Sobel claims that although finite, limited beings would need a cause, it would be a mistake to infer that their intermediate causes would again need a cause. For an intermediate cause would be beyond the realm of sensible experience.³¹⁰ Since Aquinas' argument draws on sense experience, Sobel charges him with committing the "post hoc fallacy." Though on the level of experience it can be difficult to pinpoint what is doing the causing, this would not mean that potential beings can continue in existence without a first actualizing cause. By no means is Sobel's argument a refutation of existential causality; rather, it is concerned with *knowing positively the nature* of the cause. As Keith Ward recognizes, "we cannot rule out the existence of causal influences that are undetectable by us, and which may be non-computable. We can never be sure that we have specified all causally relevant properties exhaustively."³¹¹ Sobel is not saying there is no cause. He is merely exploiting the fact that we cannot know the nature of the "intermediate cause."

Again, there is something right and wrong about Sobel's contention. In the *De Ente* argument, there are no intermediate potential beings that serve as causes. If a potential being exists, then an actual being exists. It is working in and through each potential being in an essentially ordered series (not an accidental series) of causes. In the absence of such a being, there could be no potential beings. When we try to understand the nature of the actual existent, then we realize that human language can only make valid predications of its essence, not express it fully.

³¹⁰ Jordan Howard Sobel, *Logic and Theism*, 176-179, 192, 194. Cf. William L. Rowe, *The Cosmological Argument*, 30.

³¹¹ Keith Ward, *God, Faith, and the New Millennium* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1998), 84.

Other atheists maintain that the universe should be considered the first actualizer because that would be a simpler explanation than invoking God to explain it. As Krueger puts it: “This explanation is simpler than the explanation that god *and* the universe exist. The simpler view is more likely to be true than its rival since the “universe only” model assumes less than the other model.”³¹² Whenever it is possible we should use the principle of parsimony to get rid of unnecessary explanations. Otherwise we would be left with a more difficult phenomenon to explain, one that begs for explanation: potential beings which cannot be explained by an infinite regress of causes. In point of fact, God and the universe is the simplest answer to the phenomena under scrutiny.

The First Actualizer Has Contradictory Attributes

Other atheists argue that the divine attributes are incompatible with one another: “The most telling objection that can be lodged against the cosmological argument is that it is impossible for such a being to exist, thereby showing that this argument’s conclusion is necessarily false.”³¹³ Many atheists have argued in this way to show that no matter how compelling Aquinas’ argument might seem to be, its conclusion cannot be true.³¹⁴ The properties of the first actualizer are contradictory to one another. Until the theist can provide an internally consistent definition of God, “the concept is rightly considered incoherent and explanatorily impotent.”³¹⁵ The very concept of a purely actual being is either self-contradictory or meaningless.³¹⁶

³¹² Douglas E. Krueger, *What is Atheism?*, 151.

³¹³ Richard M. Gale, *On the Nature and Existence of God*, 238.

³¹⁴ The most forceful atheistic attempt is found in Michael Martin and Ricki Monnier, eds., *The Impossibility of God* (Buffalo: Prometheus, 2003), 181-422; See also Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 100.

³¹⁵ Douglas E. Krueger, *What is Atheism?*, 151.

³¹⁶ See William L. Rowe, *The Cosmological Argument*, 168-221.

But this objection is fallacious for a variety of reasons.³¹⁷ On the face of it, there is nothing logically contradictory with the existence of an actual being. Since we know what a potential being is, we can just as easily conceptualize a non-potential being. We know what an actual being *is not*. Necessity denotes that it is not dependent on anything else for its existence; immutability is another way of saying that it does *not* change. All the attributes stem from experiencing the nature of the world and drawing conclusions based upon what is entailed from that nature. Knowledge of God is derived from negating what is already known about potential beings. The negative terms used to speak about God does not mean that we are left with nothing. Positive information about God is derived from applying the principle of causality. He is a being because all potential beings depend on him for their existence. He is pure actuality because he is the first cause of lesser actualities. We can prove *that* pure act exists, but we will never be able to grasp *what* he is.

Although many distinct characteristics are being attributed to God's nature, they are only being said of one being whose essence is to exist. He is one being, but many things are being said about him. All of the attributes are referring to the same being. There is only being about which these attributes can be mentioned.

There Might Be Many First Actualizers

³¹⁷ The best published work on the coherency of the divine attributes still remains Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *God: His Existence and His Nature: A Thomistic Solution of Certain Agnostic Antinomies*, 2 vol., 5th ed., (St. Louis: Herder & Herder, 1955). See also Barry Miller, *A Most Unlikely God: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Nature of God* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame, 1996); Benedict Ashley, *The Way Toward Wisdom*, 406-421.

But what if there are many actual beings, each of which is uncaused?³¹⁸

However, even if the argument is granted, it would not be a favorable conclusion for atheism. Surely the atheist does not want many Gods! Nonetheless, Thomists have always had the resources to combat this problem.³¹⁹ There cannot be two or more actual beings (an actual being which is simple, good, eternal, infinite, immutable, and omnipotent). As Norris Clarke said: “This is a quick and easy step, admitted by just about all metaphysicians, I believe, once the existence of an absolutely infinite being is granted.”³²⁰

If there were more than one actual, unlimited being, then there would have to be something that distinguishes the one from the others. But there is no way for an infinite being to differ from another infinite being unless there is some potential for differentiation inherent in each of them. In order to distinguish between two beings, there must be something that is different about them. Otherwise, one could never differentiate between them to identify either of them. But actual being has no limitations. Because an actual being has no potential for differentiation, there can only be one of them.

The New Atheism and the Arguments of Aquinas

The release of several major books on atheism has put the God question on the front lines of current cultural conversation. This movement is commonly known as the “New Atheism.” Unfortunately these critics have failed to interact in any significant way

³¹⁸ Paul Edwards, “The Cosmological Argument,” 46; Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification*, 121, 122. J.L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, 91; Graham Oppy, *Arguing About Gods*, 99, 106; Nicholas Everitt, *The Non-Existence of God*, 75; Douglas E. Krueger, *What is Atheism?*, 147; Peter Angeles, *The Problem of God*, 43.

³¹⁹ See the excellent exposition of Aquinas’ solution to this problem in John F. Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 150-156.

³²⁰ W. Norris Clarke, *The One and the Many: A Contemporary Thomistic Metaphysics*, 221.

with Aquinas' natural theology.³²¹ Richard Dawkins is the only one who entertains Aquinas' arguments.³²² Sometimes the lack of dialogue with the most formidable arguments for God's existence can give innocent bystanders the impression that God's nonexistence is 'more probable than not' or even proven. Worse, Aquinas is rarely mentioned by the New Atheists, and this might suggest that he is irrelevant. Some Thomists have written published responses to Dawkins' case, but they have yet to be seriously considered by any of the New Atheists.³²³

Interlude

While most of the attention surrounding Vatican I is dedicated to papal primacy and infallibility, many Catholic theologians forget about the vital statements pronounced in the Constitution on faith and reason. Most Catholic theologians and philosophers vigorously defended the Council's teaching well into the middle of the twentieth century. But almost immediately after the Second Vatican Council, theologians began to neglect it, and, in some cases, argued that it was irrelevant or even problematic for faith. As Hans Küng observed: "Against the exaggerations of a natural theology that assumes that it is possible to prove by pure reason the existence of God and even the attributes of his

³²¹ Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 2005); idem, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Vintage, 2008); Michael Shermer, *How We Believe* (New York: Freeman, 2000); Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Viking, 2006); David Mills, *Atheist Universe* (Berkeley: Ulysses, 2006); Victor J. Stenger, *God: The Failed Hypothesis: How Science Shows that God Does Not Exist* (Amherst: Prometheus, 2007); idem, *The New Atheism: Taking a Stand for Science and Reason* (Amherst: Prometheus, 2009); Christopher Hitchens, *god is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Hachette, 2009).

³²² Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 100-103.

³²³ Thomas Crean, *God is No Delusion: A Refutation of Richard Dawkins* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2009), 35-49; Edward Feser, *The Last Superstition: A Refutation of the New Atheism* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's, 2010), 27-119; Keith Ward, *Why There Almost Certainly is a God: Doubting Dawkins* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008), 102-123.

nature, objections have increased enormously.”³²⁴ Not only did many theologians depreciate the conciliar teaching on faith and reason, but many atheists continue to challenge it. However, such a view cannot be squared with the teaching of Vatican II.

The most salient contemporary atheistic critiques of Aquinas’ natural theology were presented and briefly discussed in this chapter. Theologians now might gain a comprehensive understanding of the recent trends in atheist criticism. It will also help theists understand how Thomistic theologians have responded back to them in a postconciliar church in the relevant literature. Neither side of the debate shows any signs of weariness, but Thomists continue to have the philosophical capital that is needed to answer these criticisms and show the inherent weaknesses in atheistic critiques of Aquinas’s arguments for God. With a solid argument being made in favor of a theistic God existing, we should ask whether this God is likely to communicate with the human race in a special way. For example, Christianity claims that God has revealed himself in the person of Jesus. Islam claims that Muhammad received a special message from the angel Gabriel. These conclusions will establish a philosophical framework for the evidentialist approach in the next chapter.

Why God is Likely to Communicate With the Human Race

All three monotheistic religions teach that God's existence can be known through the natural light of human reason (Psalm 19:1; Rom. 1:18–20; Sura 17:44). Whether this bland understanding of God is accessible to persons by an internal intuition or by

³²⁴ Hans Küng, *Does God Exist?: An Answer for Today*, trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1980), 531.

philosophical reasoning is insignificant to the Scriptural writers. They do appeal to reasoning at least of a common sense kind that is accessible to all persons.

Statistics indicate that the majority of the world's population, whether they are religious or not, believe in some sort of God. Atheism has never been a popular world and life view. Although most of the world's religions tend toward monotheism, their understanding of God is formulated in different ways.

The deist conception of the natural knowledge of God remains unstable (deists hold that God exists, but that he remains aloof from the world, unable or unwilling to disclose himself to humanity). Theists, on the other hand, maintain that a transcendent God exists, but that he is active, purposive, and caring for the human race. In this view, God seeks communion with human beings. It is easy to see why deists typically deny the possibility of miracles. Considering that they emphasize that a perfect God will necessarily create a perfect universe, there would be no subsequent need for this kind of God to “interfere” or “tune it up” again by performing a miracle on behalf of the creature. A perfectly created universe ought to run on its own steam without any form of divine-human communication. But this seems contrary to some deists’ belief that God is personal. The idea that a personal God would want to communicate with humanity seems not only possible, but likely with this premise in mind. What personal being would not want to respond to other persons who are in need of personal attention?

For some deists to argue that God would not want to communicate with the human race because creation must have been perfectly created seems to diminish the perfect nature of the Deity – not enhance it. If a perfect, personal God had enough reason and love to create humanity in the first place, then it seems that he would want to address

and help persons with their most vexing problems. As Avery Cardinal Dulles states, “If God were so cold and detached, it is impossible to conceive why He would have made the world in the first place.”³²⁵ God would try to help those persons that he is responsible for creating to help them become good. Oxford philosopher Richard Swinburne notes, “Good people seek to share what they have with others and to cooperate with others in all these activities. Good people forgive those who make reparation and ask for forgiveness. But also, ... good people may sometimes to a limited extent and for a limited period allow those for whom they are responsible to suffer ... if only by so doing can some good purpose be achieved.”³²⁶ The Dionysian principle still rings true: a good person does not remain enclosed within him or herself, but diffuses her goodness outward for the betterment of others.

Some of the deepest questions that most, if not all, persons ask during their lives include the following: where have we come from (origins)?; why do we suffer?; what makes life worth living (questions about meaning or purpose)?; what is right and wrong (morality)?; who are we (identity)?; and what awaits us at death (destiny)?³²⁷ These common questions stem from our natural inclinations. Thomistic natural law theorists propose at least five natural inclinations which are common to *all* normally functioning persons: the inclination to the good; the inclination to preserve life, including sexual union and the rearing of offspring, the inclination to have knowledge of the truth, and to live in society.³²⁸

³²⁵ Avery Dulles, *Apologetics and the Biblical Christ* (New York: Newman, 1971), 71.

³²⁶ Richard Swinburne, *Was Jesus God?* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2008), 24.

³²⁷ *Nostra Aetate*, 1.

³²⁸ Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Mary Thomas Noble, 3rd ed. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 1995), 400–456.

Therefore it makes sense that a perfectly good and personal God would want persons to have insight into the nature of the answers to these questions. A theistic God will intervene in human history (and not disclose himself to impersonal creatures) to not only identify with his personal creations, but to show them that they have intrinsic dignity (for God acts in history for their own sake) and that he cares about them. God will probably concern himself with giving personal creatures some theoretical answers and practical solutions to questions like these in order to make life more bearable. Although the common person on the street can know that God exists, it makes good sense to suppose that God will bring this vague knowledge of his existence to an even greater fulfillment by revealing himself more clearly to persons.

The existence of so many theologies and ways of speaking about God in the world's great religions strongly suggests that humans are not content with knowing that God exists, but that they have a longing to know God in the best way that they can. The fact of so many theologies in so many of the world's religions strongly attests to this point. Humans ceaselessly search for answers to their problems in the light of the divine. Seen within this light, it seems cruel that God would refrain from providing some sort of human fulfillment that goes beyond the bland knowledge of his existence. Real needs can probably be satisfied. If there is a real need for food, then food probably exists. If there is a real need for camaraderie, then friendship can be attained. The same principle holds true about human needs with respect to ultimate concerns.

In conclusion, the existence and nature of God and the human race provides us with compelling reasons to hope for at least one divine disclosure at one point in human history. Human action requires some sort of architectonic principle that has the capability

of specifically organizing human life around it. As Charles Morerod explains: “As it is impossible to build a house if all workers just keep moving without any global purpose, it is impossible to live a somehow efficient life without a main organizing principle.”³²⁹

God created us with these desires to begin with. Says Morerod: “To know the final end matters supremely for all human actions. As long as we do not know it, we can make different kinds of mistakes, that is, substitute the final end with partial ends (a kind of idolatry), or choose the wrong means to reach the final end, or simply refuse God to be our final end.”³³⁰ A divine revelation will be able to help persons to focus on their final end in order to help them live life in the way it was meant to be lived. Although it is not necessary for God to reveal himself to humanity, there are nevertheless good reasons to think he would do such a thing in light of his nature, along with some of the intrinsic needs of humanity.

The Number and Mode of Revelation(s)

I will now address some additional questions that are much more tedious than what was said in the last section. The questions that will guide this section will be the following: How many revelations should we expect from a theistic God? What form will this revelation take? What is the time and place it will occur? These questions must be answered before we embark on the evidential apologetics component of the dissertation.

If human persons are to develop their characters (which seems like a good thing for all persons to do), then they will need a certain amount of epistemic distance between

³²⁹ Charles Morerod, *The Church and the Human Quest For Truth* (Naples: Sapientia Press of Ave Maria University, 2008), 5.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

themselves and God.³³¹ If God were to make his presence immediately known to all persons at once, then in all likelihood persons would not learn to perform good actions because of their inherent goodness. In this respect, God stands back from human affairs in order for us to develop character in ourselves and in others. The Creator gives us a significant amount of responsibility so that we will learn how to exercise our freedom in the proper way.

Like any good parent, one of the greatest tactics in parenting is to stand back and let the child learn what it means to be responsible for their actions (and to be responsible for others). On the face of it, this notion makes the likelihood of many divine revelations unlikely. Many revelations will not necessarily make persons flourish and become the persons they were meant to be. As in the case of any loving, personal caregiver, God will give persons what they need, not an excessive amount of guidance that will probably prevent persons from learning what it means to develop a good character. Too much divine interference could make us too dependent on these disclosures and less concerned with the good things in life for goodness sake.

Many revelations would deprive persons of the responsibility to tell others about the answers and solutions that would be given by few revelations. Given the communitarian nature of humanity, we can safely assume that if someone receives the revelatory message that God has given to them that they will want others to know and accept it (for it is good that humans should build one another up with the truth that was given to them from God). Numerous amounts of revelations would prevent persons from fostering human relationships because there would be no need for persons to tell one

³³¹ Although I do not consider myself a theodist, this point has a venerable past. See, e.g., John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1976); and Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998).

another about them. A large amount of revelations could impede God's purposes for renewing humanity. We should expect these revelations to be “less” rather than “more.”

Further, the number of revelations should be *very few* in number if God will ensure through his general providence that those who learn or believe in his disclosures to humanity will share these messages with as many people as possible. Because the strengthening of the communion of persons seems like an inevitable result of the purpose of God giving a revelation in the first place, it is likely that we should expect very few revelations if persons have the capability of spreading it effectively to majority of the human population. Although we could never know how many revelations to expect from God (after all, some persons might expect a dozen of them, for that seems like a “small number’ to them), we can safely surmise that there will be a direct correlation between the number of revelations and the intrinsic capabilities of persons to bring this message to others. If the human race as a collective whole is capable of bringing the message of a single revelation from God to the majority of the population across the ages of human civilization, then of course there will be no need for God to provide more than one of them.

Turning to another concern, we would expect this revelation to meet us on our grounds so that we can sufficiently understand it. The message will not take the form of a language or some other communicative means that persons are incapable of learning (or believing, or what have you). Considering that human persons are made up of body and soul, we would expect this revelation to meet us in material and spiritual forms. If this revelation does not manifest itself in or through these forms, then we would have good reason to question whether it is an adequate enough revelation.

But what about the time and place of revelation? Here we can say a few things as well. On the one hand, it seems highly probable that a divine revelation will have to occur when human persons are able to understand and absorb its contents. So, it will not occur at an exceedingly early stage in evolutionary history when the human brain is still undeveloped. On the other hand, it is likely that a revelation will occur at a time and place that will enable the original witnesses of the revelation to successfully bring the message out to others. Thus there will have to be an adequate communication system into the surrounding region where the revelation occurred in order to allow the original recipients of the revelation to keep the message and its following going. The revelatory message will be given at a time and place where humans have the capability of successfully spreading the message to as many people as possible within the short span of time that the human race will have to live their lives on the earth. A perfect God will want as many people as possible to hear his answers to their most profound questions and concerns.

Perhaps there will be a reliable oral and written tradition process in the culture where the revelation will occur. The transmission of this revelation in either written or oral forms will be able to satisfy every subsequent generation's questions about it. To boot, the original recording of the event ought to be able to withstand critical scrutiny by modern epistemological standards. For example, if the revelation occurred thousands of years ago in a very obscure part of the world, then we as modern Westerners would expect to have a convincing amount of evidence for the event that will satisfy the rigors of modern scientific standards (and other reliable means of attaining knowledge).

Let us draw some conclusions about the probability of certain types of divine revelation(s). First, we know that it is likely that a theistic God will disclose himself to humanity. Second, these revelations will be “few” in number. A miracle is, by definition, something that does not happen very often. It is possible that there could be only one revelation, but we simply cannot know for sure how many there will be. God is the only one who knows whether persons are capable of bringing the message to the majority of people who will ever live. With this foreknowledge, he determines how many times that he will provide a message.

Third, they will occur in a form that is conducive to human understanding. Lastly, a revelation will occur at a time and place that is culturally and technologically conducive for humans to propagate the message successfully. When I say “successfully,” I also mean that subsequent generations who are exposed to the message will be intellectually satisfied by the evidence for the event.

A TEST CASE IN EVIDENTIAL APOLOGETICS

Many Catholics have been hesitant to affirm and defend the resurrection of Jesus as an historical event. This hesitation stems, in part, from the abuses of neo-scholastic resurrection apologetics that prevailed roughly from the middle of the nineteenth century up to the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). According to these scholars, the neo-scholastic approach all too easily interpreted Jesus’ resurrection as a mere resuscitation or reanimation of a corpse, not allowing it to be seen as a central mystery of the Christian faith.³³²

As a result, many postconciliar theologians have said that the resurrection a “meta-historical” or “trans-historical” occurrence, not an event within history.³³³ They recognize genuine continuity between the earthly body of Jesus and his glorious, incorruptible body in an other-worldly realm of existence, but this transition should not be affirmed as historical in any proper sense of that term.³³⁴ This shift away from the historical understanding of Jesus’ resurrection may be partly responsible for some writers simply denying the bodily nature of Jesus’ resurrection.³³⁵

But there are many reasons why the resurrection should not be interpreted as a sheer meta-historical event, not to say that the appellation itself is self-contradictory.³³⁶ First, this interpretation of the resurrection is difficult to square with Catholic teaching.

³³² Cf. Raymond Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1973), pp. 125, 126

³³³ Scholars who deny the historical character of the resurrection include Thomas P. Rausch, *Who Is Jesus?: An Introduction to Christology* (Collegeville: The Liturgical, 2003), 119, and George E. Ladd, *I Believe in the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 101; cf. 127.

³³⁴ For contemporary perspectives on the bodily resurrection of Jesus by Catholic systematic theologians, see Bernard P. Prusak, “Bodily Resurrection in Catholic Perspectives,” *Theological Studies* 61 (2000): 64–105.

³³⁵ For a discussion, see Peter Carnley, *The Structure of Resurrection Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1987), 148–182.

³³⁶ An “event” is something that by definition takes place *in* history.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* remarks: “Christ’s Resurrection cannot be interpreted as something outside the physical order, and it is impossible not to acknowledge it as an historical fact.”³³⁷ Pope John Paul II described the resurrection as, “in the first place, an historical event. It took place in a precise context of time and place.” He went on to note that “while the resurrection is an event determined according to time and place, nevertheless it transcends and stands above history ... Christ's Resurrection is the greatest Event in the history of salvation, and indeed, we can say in the history of humanity, since it gives definitive meaning to the world. The whole world revolves around the Cross, but only in the Resurrection does the cross reach its full significance of salvific Event.”³³⁸ While speaking of the resurrection as transcending history, it remains an event “in the history of humanity” and is “an event determined according to time and space.” If more nuanced, the late Pope seems in substantial accord with the *Catechism*.

Second, the meta-historical view can hardly claim much precedent in the history of Jewish and Christian thought. N.T. Wright has shown that the ahistorical view of Jesus’ resurrection, which tends to reduce it to exaltation, is the product of modern theology: “the idea that there was originally no difference for the earliest Christians between resurrection and exaltation/ascension is a twentieth century fiction, based on a misreading of Paul.”³³⁹ Skeptical scholar Peter Carnley agrees with Wright: “For many centuries the accepted and, indeed, quite unchallenged way of understanding the resurrection of Jesus ... was to regard it as an historical event Regardless of whether

³³⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, N. 643.

³³⁸ Pope John Paul II, *Weekly Catechesis*, March 1, 1989, 24; from *Talks of John Paul II*, 13 (Pro Ecclesia, 509 Madison Ave. New York 10022) 15 (1989).

³³⁹ N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 625.

one relied on an authoritatively-backed, transmitted tradition or a more scientifically based reconstruction, supported by evidence and rational inference from it, the assertion that the resurrection of Jesus was an historical event of the past has been offered to men and women as the distinctive substance of Christian belief.”³⁴⁰

Furthermore, the meta-historical view involves, in the words of William Lane Craig, “a patent misreading of the gospel narratives, not to speak of Jewish texts.” Scholars who deny the historicity of Jesus' resurrection, in effect, turn it into “Jesus’ translation into heaven on the pattern of Enoch and Elijah, a quite different category than resurrection of the dead.”³⁴¹

Third, even if the corpse of Jesus disappeared into an otherworldly state of incorruptible existence, this would not mean we should refrain from recognizing a historical transition. As Craig argues:

Transitional events like stopping, exiting, and dying do not occur at any single spacetime point. That the sorites paradoxes are, indeed, the culprit here, and not the nature of the resurrection, is evident from the fact that even if the resurrection were conceived as a transformation wholly within space and time, one could not specify a single spacetime point at which it happened. Nevertheless, just as it is perfectly acceptable to say that the shopper exited the building, say, through the front door rather than the rear entrance, so Jesus' transformation to his glorified state can be similarly located in the sense that one can specify the spacetime point at which his corruptible existence ended. So just as the historian can determine where someone exited a building or when someone died, there is no in principle objection to the historian's determining where and when Jesus' resurrection occurred. It would be very much like determining on the basis of testimony and evidence where and when the children in C.S. Lewis' tale first stepped from this world into Narnia.³⁴²

Thus proponents of the ahistorical view are hard put to escape from an historical understanding of Jesus’ resurrection.

³⁴⁰ Peter Carnley, *The Structure of Resurrection Belief*, 29, 30.

³⁴¹ William Lane Craig's response to the metahistorical view of the resurrection, see his “‘Noli Me Tangere:’ Why John Meier Won't Touch the Risen Lord”, *Heythrop Journal* 50.1 (2009): 94.

³⁴² *Ibid.*, 95.

Undoubtedly the newest quest for the historical Jesus has ushered in a strong wave of apologetic writings defending the historicity of Jesus' resurrection. The main evidence considered usually consists of the post-mortem appearances, the empty tomb, and the origin of the earliest disciples' belief in the Risen Christ, along with earliest Christians' worship practices despite their every predisposition to the contrary. Apologist Gary Habermas has developed what is called the "minimal facts approach"³⁴³ to defending the resurrection. According to him there are twelve widely accepted facts that have been furnished by the majority of New Testament scholars:

(1) Jesus died due to the rigors of crucifixion and (2) was buried. (3) Jesus' death caused the disciples to despair and lose hope. (4) Although not as frequently recognized, many scholars hold that Jesus was buried in a tomb that was discovered to be empty just a few days later.

Critical scholars even agree that (5) at this time the disciples had real experiences that they believed were literal appearances of the risen Jesus. Because of these experiences, (6) the disciples were transformed from doubters who were afraid to identify themselves with Jesus to bold proclaimers of his death and resurrection, even being willing to die for this belief. (7) This message was central in the early church preaching and (8) was especially proclaimed in Jerusalem, where Jesus had died shortly before.

As a result of this message, (9) the church was born and grew, (10) with Sunday as the primary day of worship. (11) James, the brother of Jesus and a skeptic, was converted to the faith when he also believed he saw the resurrected Jesus. (12) A few years later Paul the persecutor of Christians was also converted by an experience that he, similarly, believed to be an appearance of the risen Jesus.³⁴⁴

Habermas wants scholars to begin with the conclusions set by the scholarly consensus:

"one of my interests is to ascertain if we can detect some widespread directions in the contemporary discussions—where are most recent scholars heading on these issues? Of

³⁴³ For representative texts of Habermas, see *The Historical Jesus: Ancient Evidence for the Life of Christ* (Joplin: College Press, 1996); *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003); "Explaining Away Jesus' Resurrection: The Recent Revival of Hallucination Theories," *Christian Research Journal*, 23 (2001): 26-31; "Experiences of the Risen Jesus: The Foundational Historical Issue in the Early Proclamation of the Resurrection," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*, 45.3 (Fall 2006): 288-297.

³⁴⁴ Gary R. Habermas and Antony G.N. Flew, *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?: The Resurrection Debate*, Terry L. Miethe, (ed) (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 19, 20.

course, the best way to do this is to comb through the literature and attempt to provide an accurate assessment.”³⁴⁵

The consensus is known from the conclusions set by most scholars who study the subject, including conservative and liberal scholars. He explains how he is able to determine what counts as the consensus in his article: “Resurrection Research from 1975 to the Present: What are Critical Scholars Saying?” Says Habermas: “Since 1975, more than 1400 scholarly publications on the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus have appeared. Over the last five years, I have tracked these texts, which were written in German, French, and English. Well over 100 subtopics are addressed in the literature, almost all of which I have examined in detail.”³⁴⁶ By cataloguing the major trends in the field, Habermas wants everyone in the dialogue and/or debate to begin with the same basic evidence. As indicated by Habermas in his major study, unbelievers and skeptics of Christianity have taken these reported facts seriously and try to account for them in purely naturalistic terms.³⁴⁷

Let us turn now to the historical evidence for the resurrection before we assess the rival explanations of it.

The Honorable Burial and Empty Tomb of Jesus

Many scholars argue for the credibility of the honorable burial of Jesus. As Bart Ehrman writes: “What I think we *can* say with confidence is that Jesus . . . probably was

³⁴⁵ Gary R. Habermas, “Resurrection Research from 1975 to the Present: What are Critical Scholars Saying?” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, 3.2 (January 2005): 135-153. See also John M. G. Barclay, “The Resurrection in Contemporary Biblical Scholarship,” in Gavin D’Costa (ed.), *Resurrection Reconsidered* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1996), 13–30.

³⁴⁶ Gary R. Habermas, “Resurrection Research from 1975 to the Present: What are Critical Scholars Saying?,” 135.

³⁴⁷ See also James Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 97.

buried.”³⁴⁸ Nowhere does Ehrman show signs of doubting the burial in his writings.

Closely linked to the burial is the discovery of the empty tomb by a group of Jesus’ women followers. Ehrman says we have “solid traditions” about the empty tomb, and that we can have “some certainty” for its reliability.³⁴⁹

Although the Gospels contain widely divergent portraits of Jesus, this would not mean that the historicity of certain central events reported in them are unreliable.³⁵⁰ All four Gospels agree that at least one woman discovered Jesus’ empty tomb: “It seems hard to believe that this just happened by a way of a fluke of storytelling. It seems much more likely that, at least with the traditions involving the empty tomb, we are dealing with something actually rooted in history.”³⁵¹

These conclusions are consistent with the judgment of many other scholars.³⁵² Usually cumulative case arguments are employed in support of the burial and/or empty tomb of Jesus. While each piece of evidence may be individually suggestive, when combined together the case becomes all the more plausible. Here I will briefly comb

³⁴⁸ Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1999), 229. Cf. 230.

³⁴⁹ Bart D. Ehrman, “From Jesus to Constantine: A History of Early Christianity,” Lecture 4, “Oral and Written Traditions About Jesus,” (The Teaching Company, 2003).

³⁵⁰ Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium*, 232.

³⁵¹ Bart D. Ehrman, *Peter, Paul and Mary Magdalene* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2006), p. 226. Cf. 227.

³⁵² See Dale C. Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus: The Earliest Christian Tradition and Its Interpreters* (New York: T & T Clark, 2005), 332, 334; Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology* (Mahwah: Paulist, 1994), 170; William Lane Craig, in Paul Copan and Ronald K. Tacelli, (eds.), *Jesus’ Resurrection: Fact or Figment?* (Downer’s Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), 31-39; John Dominic Crossan, “The Resurrection: Historical Event or Theological Explanation?: A Dialogue,” in Robert T. Stewart, (ed.), *The Resurrection of Jesus: John Dominic Crossan and N. T. Wright in Dialogue* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 33; also see his “Bodily-Resurrection Faith,” 176; Gerald O’Collins, *Believing in the Resurrection: The Meaning and Promise of the Risen Jesus* (Mahwah: Paulist, 2012), 80-99; Pheme Perkins, “The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth,” in Bruce Chilton and Craig A. Evans, (eds.), *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the State of Current Research* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994), 435-437, 442; Geza Vermes, *The Resurrection of Jesus: History and Myth* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 140, 141; N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 321, 686-696, 709-710

through the relevant literature to present the most common arguments used in support of these reported facts.

The first prong of the argument in support of the empty tomb lies in establishing the burial of Jesus in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. If one recognizes the burial account, then the place of Jesus's tomb would have been known to Jew and Roman (and probably the women disciples). By identifying the historicity of the burial, this creates a conundrum for those who deny the empty tomb because they must answer the question as to how the disciples preached the resurrection in the city of Jerusalem, the city where Jesus died and was buried.³⁵³ The enemies of the Christian faith could have easily gone to the tomb and paraded the body across the streets to subvert the new Christian heresy. Notice that the case for the burial and empty tomb is just as crude as the historicity of the crucifixion or the existence of Jesus himself. Nothing is miraculous about these events.

First, the burial is mentioned in the primitive confession of 1 Cor. 15:4, which can be traced back to within the earliest time after the crucifixion. The passage is written by Paul to ensure and reinforce that Jesus truly died and was buried. In this verse, we read: "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, and that he was buried. . ." Dale Allison points out that "The Greek verb [in verse 4] means to 'bury' and would hardly be used of the unceremonious dumping of a criminal into an unmarked trench as dog food; that was not burial but its denial."³⁵⁴

Second, the burial account was in the source material used by Mark—and is probably very old. As William Lane Craig comments, "It is now universally

³⁵³ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*, trans. Lewis L. Wilkens and Duane A. Priebe, 2d ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), 101.

³⁵⁴ Dale C. Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus: The Earliest Christian Tradition and its Interpreters*, 353.

acknowledged that the burial account was part of that story, which was used as source material by Mark. There is no break at all between Mark's description of Jesus' death (Mark 15:33-41) and his description of Jesus' burial (Mark 15:42-47). It is a continuous narrative, and there is no reason to think that Mark's source ended abruptly with Jesus' death without telling of His burial. That means that the burial account is very old and therefore probably historically reliable."³⁵⁵

The third evidence for the burial comes from analyzing the role that Joseph of Arimathea played in the burial account. As Wolfhart Pannenberg states, "The burial itself is tied to the name of Joseph of Arimathea. This can hardly have been invented secondarily, since the entire tradition about Jesus' burial hangs on this name."³⁵⁶

Fourth, the tomb stories in the Gospels do not show signs of legendary traces and are written in a straightforward, factual way (Mark 15:42-47; John 19:38-42). All four Gospels mention the burial story—a significant point given the criteria of multiple attestation: "each contains additional traditions presupposing that Jesus was not thrown onto a pile for criminals but rather interred (Matt. 27:62-66; 28:11-15; Mark 14:8; 16:1-8; Luke 24:13-35; John 20:1-10, 11-18)."³⁵⁷

Fifth, considering the different kinds of tombs that archaeologists have furnished us with, it is evident that Jesus's tomb was probably an *acrosolia* tomb, or what is known as a "bench tomb" (this tomb is consistent with someone with the status of Joseph of Arimathea).³⁵⁸

³⁵⁵ William Lane Craig, *The Son Rises* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 51, 52.

³⁵⁶ Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*, 103. See also Raymond E. Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (New York: Paulist, 1973), 113, 114; Stephen T. Davis, *Risen Indeed* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 81.

³⁵⁷ William Lane Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellon, 1989), 354, 355.

³⁵⁸ Craig, *The Son Rises*, 55-57.

Sixth, the fact that women saw the burial place where Jesus was laid is highly probable, confirming the historicity of the burial. “The crucial point here,” says Stephen Davis, “is that the Gospels all claim that the location of Jesus’ tomb was known to the women and to the disciples (Mark 15:47; Matt. 27:61; Luke 23:55; John 20:1). This claim is clearly embedded in the burial account of Jesus.”³⁵⁹ The Jewish New Testament scholar Pinchas Lapide argues that “The circumstances that the women wanted to anoint the dead Jesus shortly after his burial, *as Jewish custom demanded*, proves that basically none of the disciples nor the women themselves, . . . expected his resurrection (my emphasis added).”³⁶⁰ Therefore it is implausible that Jesus was not buried or that the place of the tomb was unknown.

Closely linked to the burial account are the traditional arguments for the empty tomb.

First, the earliest Jewish polemic against the resurrection presupposes that the tomb was empty, or at least shifted elsewhere (Matt. 28:11-15; John 20:2, 13, 15). As Gerald O’Collins has stated, “We have no early evidence that anyone, either Christian or non-Christian, ever alleged that Jesus’ tomb still contained his remains.”³⁶¹ Thus the earliest Jewish argument against the resurrection was not whether the tomb was empty, but who or what emptied it.

Next, the relevant texts mentioning the empty tomb are not apologetical or creative in scope; they intend on giving historical fact (cf. Mark 16:1-8; John 20:1, 2, 11-18). To appreciate how sober Mark’s account is, for example, one ought to read the account of

³⁵⁹ Davis, *Risen Indeed*, 74.

³⁶⁰ Pinchas Lapide, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, trans. Wilhelm C. Linss (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1982; reprint, Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 96.

³⁶¹ Gerald O’Collins, *The Resurrection of Jesus Christ: Some Contemporary Issues* (Milwaukee: Marquette University, 1993), 22.

the resurrection in the *Gospel of Peter*. This gospel describes Jesus' egress from the tomb with angels accompanying the risen body into the heavens. A talking cross and a voice from heaven are heard in this magnificent scene. The event is witnessed by the Roman guard, the Jews and a multitude of other people. Unlike the Gospels, this kind of description is characteristic of a legendary account.

Moreover, women are seen as the ones who discover the empty tomb.³⁶² As illustrated by Lapide: "in a purely fictional narrative one would have avoided making women the crown witnesses of the resurrection since they were considered in rabbinic Judaism as incapable of giving valid testimony (compare Luke 24:11)."³⁶³ Legend makers do not usually invent positively unhelpful information. Pinchas Lapide seems to attest to this point: "nowhere in the most ancient reports is it asserted that the statements of the women brought anyone to faith in the resurrection."³⁶⁴

The wording that Jesus was 'buried and then raised' in 1 Cor. 15 implies the empty tomb.³⁶⁵ Even though the empty tomb is not *explicitly* mentioned in the creed, this would

³⁶² According to Raimond Bieringer and Isabelle Vanden Hove, "Mary Magdelene in the Gospels," *Louvain Studies*, 32 (2007): 253, 254, the different theological portraits of Mary Magdelene make it difficult to conclude anything historical about the *details* of her character (or *what she was like* as a person). They concluded: "It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to identify the historically reliable elements *in the different images* of Mary Magdelene. . . It would thus be more prudent to resist the temptation of reducing the fourfold image of Mary Magdelene to one" (emphasis mine). I have no problem with their conclusion. In point of fact, their conclusion is compatible with my argument: women were probably the discoverers of the empty tomb. Nowhere do Bieringer and Vanden Hove dispute my point about women as the discoverers of the empty tomb. I do not "harmonize" the Gospel texts; rather I am "including the common elements" in the resurrection narratives to make what is otherwise a very simple contention (one that is accepted by the majority of scholars who study the subject). A good article which drives home the point I have made here can be found in Gerald O'Collins and Daniel Kendall, "Mary Magdelene as Major Witness to Jesus' Resurrection," *Theological Studies*, 48 (1987): 631-646.

³⁶³ Lapide, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 95; Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus*, 326-330.

³⁶⁴ Lapide, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 97.

³⁶⁵ Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus*, 85-159, 358-360.

not mean Paul did not know about it, or that we cannot infer that it was factual.³⁶⁶

Commenting on these verses, N.T. Wright remarked,

Early Christianity did not consist of a new spirituality or ethic. It consisted of the announcement of things that had *happened*, whose significance lay precisely in their happenedness: specifically, the messiah's death, burial, and resurrection. . . The empty tomb, though not mentioned here, is presupposed. It is we, not the early Christians, who have made the empty tomb a major focal point of discussion. For Paul the Pharisee, saying 'he was raised, leaving an empty tomb' would have been tautologous.³⁶⁷

Raymond Brown concurs with Wright on these passages: "It is not difficult to understand why this presupposition of an empty tomb may not have been articulated until later. The early preachers were not giving continuous accounts of what happened but were proclaiming the risen Jesus."³⁶⁸

Still other scholars proposed different reasons why Paul did not explicitly mention the empty tomb. Perhaps he was disinclined to mention it because he has up to this point in the letter been at pains to persuade his readers that he is just as much as an apostle as James and the others (cf. 1 Cor. 9:1-5). Maybe Paul knew that the Corinthians already knew about it and did not feel the need to mention it. Maybe it was not as important as the appearances and/or salvation (cf. 1 Cor. 1:23). It must be remembered that in the Jewish mindset the empty tomb would have been axiomatic given what was meant by resurrection. Resurrection in Judaism, to be sure, included one's physical body.³⁶⁹

The notion of "on the third day" in 1 Cor 15. counts as additional evidence for the empty tomb.³⁷⁰ As Craig concluded in his excellent article, "the phrase 'on the third day'

³⁶⁶ N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis; Fortress, 2003), 321; James D.G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 836.

³⁶⁷ N.T. Wright and Marcus J. Borg, *The Meaning of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1999), 119.

³⁶⁸ Raymond E. Brown, "The Resurrection and Biblical Criticism," *Commonweal*, 87.8 (November 24, 1967): 235.

³⁶⁹ The major study of this point can be found in Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*.

³⁷⁰ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 322; cf. Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus*, 124; Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, trans. V. Green. (Mahwah: Paulist,

in the formula of 1 Cor. 15 is a time indicator for the events of Easter, including the empty tomb, employing language of the Old Testament concerning God's acts of deliverance and victory on the third day, perhaps with texts like Jonah 2.11 and Hos 6.2 especially in mind. The phrase is, in Liechtenstein's words, a fusion of historical facts plus theological tradition."³⁷¹ The third day motif is not only found in Paul's letters, it can be found in other places in the New Testament.

In addition, since the gravesite was not venerated by the early Christians, this connotes that it was empty; for there were no remains to be venerated (cf. Matt. 22:29).³⁷² As James Dunn puts it: "This is indeed striking, because within contemporary Judaism, as in other religions, the desire to honour the memory of the revered dead by constructing appropriate tombs and (by implication) by veneration of the site is well attested."³⁷³ N.T. Wright fortifies this point by explaining why the disciples would have venerated the gravesite: "The practice is usually thought to reflect a belief in resurrection, in that the bones of the individual person continued to matter."³⁷⁴

Through the criteria of multiple attestation scholars have constructed arguments for the empty tomb. Each of the Gospels, with indirect references in Acts and 1 Corinthians, provide an empty tomb scene (Matt. 28:1-8; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-12; John 20:1-8; Acts 2:27-29; 1 Cor. 15:4). In each of the Gospels the tomb is vacated and confirmed by

1976), 146, 147; George Eldon Ladd, *I Believe in the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 109.

³⁷¹ William Lane Craig, "The Historicity of the Empty Tomb of Jesus," *New Testament Studies*, 31 (1985): 39-67. The "third day" motif can be seen as a theological interpretation, but I think Craig's conclusions are defensible.

³⁷² The Church of the Holy Sepulchre may stand on the original burial site, which would imply a living memory of venerating Jesus's grave. But for authorities who think otherwise, see Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 837, 838; Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 579.

³⁷³ Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 837.

³⁷⁴ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 579.

an angel who says Jesus is *not there* (cf. Matt. 28:6; Mark 16:6; Luke 24:6; John 20:12).³⁷⁵

Like the case for the burial account, the empty tomb is part of the pre-Markan Passion story. In this part of Mark we do not see any kerygmatic coloring, prophecy citations from the Old Testament, and/or use of christological titles. This has led some scholars into thinking that we are working with very old material.³⁷⁶

Since the disciples preached the resurrection in Jerusalem, it is difficult to believe that the tomb, which would have been in an identifiable place, still contained the cadaver of Jesus. Enemies of Easter faith could have gone to the tomb to prove that Jesus was not raised.³⁷⁷ Instead, we see no resistance from the Jews. Apologist Stephen Davis concludes: “We can infer, therefore, that the apostles’ proclamation of the resurrection was successful precisely because (among other things) nobody was able to produce the corpse.”³⁷⁸ In conclusion, the affirmation of the historicity of the burial and empty tomb are consistent with the cumulative case arguments provided by many scholars. As Hans Freiherr von Campenhausen concluded: “If one examines what there is to examine, one cannot avoid accepting as fact the news of the empty tomb itself and of its early discovery. There is a great deal that is convincing and definite to be said for it and little to be said against it; it is, therefore, in all probability, historical.”³⁷⁹

The Historicity of the Post-Mortem Appearances of Jesus

³⁷⁵ Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus*, 320, 321.

³⁷⁶ Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus*, 197-201, 360, 361.

³⁷⁷ Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*, 100; Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus*, 316-320.

³⁷⁸ Davis, *Risen Indeed*, 80.

³⁷⁹ Quotation by Hans Freiherr von Campenhausen, *Der Ablauf der Osterereignisse und das leere Grab*, 42. Cited in Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, trans. V. Green (Mahwah: Paulist, 1976), 128.

Another significant piece of historical evidence for the resurrection is the earliest disciples' experience of what they at least *thought* were appearances of the risen Jesus.³⁸⁰ These appearances occurred to different individuals, groups, and even enemies of Jesus and his closest followers: "some of his disciples claimed to have seen him alive afterward. Among those who made this claim, interestingly enough, was Jesus' own brother James. . . Paul claims that he himself saw Jesus after his death."³⁸¹ Elsewhere, Ehrman says: "There is little doubt, historically, about what converted Paul. He had a vision of Jesus raised from the dead. That is what he himself says, and it is recorded as one of the key incidents in the book of Acts."³⁸²

Paul's experience of the risen Jesus was so strong that he sought to convert the Gentiles to faith in Jesus. Unlike his previous convictions, Paul held that all people were meant to believe in Jesus. Ehrman continues: "The vision showed Paul beyond any reasonable doubt that Jesus—who had been crucified, dead, and buried—had come back to life. There was only one possible explanation for Jesus coming back to life: God must have raised him from the dead. And if God raised him from the dead—well, that changed everything."³⁸³ Paul's visual experience was so significant to him that almost all of his subsequent theology was centered around the truth of Jesus' death and resurrection.³⁸⁴

³⁸⁰ A good discussion of the criteria that New Testament historians use to discover the shape of the messianic and apostolic eras can be found in Mark Alan Powell, *Jesus as a Figure of History*, (Westminster: John Knox, 199), 31-50.

³⁸¹ Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium*, 229, 230. Cf. Ehrman, *Peter, Paul and Mary Magdalene*, 111.

³⁸² Ehrman, *Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene*, 111. The appearances of Jesus are almost universally attested to by critics. They differ on how to explain the appearances, but they generally do not deny that Paul (at Damascus) and the apostles (either in Jerusalem or Galilee) saw what they at least *thought* were appearances of the Risen Lord.

³⁸³ *Ibid.*, 113.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 113.

Ehrman's historical conclusions about the appearances are supported by many lines of evidence. First, the earliest and most reliable testimony that we have on the appearances is found in the ancient creed of 1 Cor. 15:3-8.³⁸⁵ Exegetically speaking, Raymond Brown, Pinchas Lapide and many others have demonstrated that the wording for "received" and "passed on" in verses 3-5 were technical standard terms for the handing down of sacred tradition in rabbinic Judaism.³⁸⁶ Paul is therefore trying to convince his readers in the most solemn way possible that Jesus appeared to them.³⁸⁷ Ehrman writes that Paul's listing of percipients, coupled with the "five hundred" in verse 6, is written for apologetic purposes.³⁸⁸ Pannenberg also recognized this point: "The appearance to the five hundred brethren at once cannot be a secondary construction to be explained by the development of the history of traditions, because Paul calls attention precisely here to the possibility of checking his assertion by saying that most of the five hundred are still alive."³⁸⁹ There is no reason for Paul to mention the 500 unless he expects his readers to question (challenge) them as witnesses.

An analysis of these passages indicates the extramental, physical nature of the appearances.³⁹⁰ Ehrman himself agrees with this assessment.³⁹¹ Any neutral observer, who did not have faith in Jesus, *could* see an appearance (e.g., Paul, James, etc.).³⁹²

³⁸⁵ For arguments on the historical trustworthiness of this passage, and how it goes back to within a few years after the crucifixion, see Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus*, 1-50.

³⁸⁶ Lapide, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 98, 99; Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus*, 81.

³⁸⁷ Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*, 89; Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 325.

³⁸⁸ Ehrman, *Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene*, 135.

³⁸⁹ Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*, 97.

³⁹⁰ Ladd, *I Believe in the Resurrection of Jesus*, 21; Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus*, 90, 91; Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 378, 383.

³⁹¹ Ehrman, *Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene*, 135.

³⁹² See Stephen T. Davis, "Seeing the Risen Jesus," in Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O'Collins (eds.), *The Resurrection: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Resurrection of Jesus* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1997), 126-147.

According to Stephen Davis, “The suggestion that only the eyes of faith could ‘see’ the Risen Jesus seems a twentieth century import, quite foreign to New Testament tradition.”³⁹³ This contention is bolstered by the fact that Jesus appeared to enemies and perhaps those who were indifferent to him during his earthly life.

The prominence of women also lends credibility to the appearance traditions (Matt. 28; John 20).³⁹⁴ Because women were regarded as inferior to men at the time, they were, for all intents and purposes, unable to be counted as legal witnesses. So if these stories were legendary accounts, then the writer would have made men rather than women as the original percipients of Jesus risen.

The diverse reporting of the appearances does not give an impression that they were contrived or wholly fabricated either. As James D.G. Dunn wrote, “Particularly in Matthew, Luke, and John 21, there has been no real attempt to provide a sequence or structured listing. Overall, the impression is given of a number of reported sightings which occurred on what might otherwise be called a random basis.” The writers (esp. Matthew) make hardly any attempt to pacify the doubts of the original percipients. Therefore, says Dunn, the appearances were most likely “part of the original eyewitness testimony.”³⁹⁵ Nowhere in the New Testament are the appearances described “as a miracle, as an event of salvation, or as a deed of God, a fact which tends to support the plausibility of the report for the disinterested reader.”³⁹⁶ Instead they were written with

³⁹³ Davis, *Risen Indeed*, 24.

³⁹⁴ Cf. James D.G. Dunn, *The Evidence for Jesus* (Louisville: Westminster, 1985), 70: “Paul’s omission of any women witnesses in his 1 Cor. 15 list may reflect something of the same bias. In what has the appearance of being a fairly formal list of witnesses, the inclusion of appearances to women would be regarded as a weakening of the claim not a strengthening. Contrariwise, the inclusion of such testimony elsewhere, *despite* the bias against women as witnesses, is all the more impressive.”

³⁹⁵ Dunn, *The Evidence for Jesus*, 70.

³⁹⁶ Lapide, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 100.

the intention of relaying the bald fact that Jesus appeared to them. The appearances, to be sure, ceased shortly after the crucifixion (John 20:29; 1 Pet. 1:8).

The final line of evidence stems from the multiple sources from which the appearance traditions originate. All four Gospels give witness to them, even to the ones found in the Pauline corpus. The appearance to Peter is independently attested to by Paul and Luke (1 Cor. 15:5; Luke 24:34); the appearance to the Twelve is mentioned by Paul, Luke, and John (1 Cor. 15:5; Luke 24:36-43; John 20:19, 20); and the appearances to the disciples in Galilee are mentioned in Mark, Matthew, and John (Mark 16:7; Matt. 28:16, 17; John 21). The Gospels take for granted that there were many different percipients who saw them at different times and places—and under different circumstances.

To conclude: many scholars (if not a consensus) are convinced that after the crucifixion the risen Jesus made himself seen to friend and foe alike.³⁹⁷ In the words of the critical historian E.P. Sanders: “That Jesus’ followers (and later Paul) had resurrection experiences is, in my judgment, a fact. What the reality was that gave rise to the experiences I do not know.” Says Sanders: “Finally we know that after his death his followers experienced what they described as the ‘resurrection’: the appearance of a living but transformed person who actually died.”³⁹⁸ James Dunn adds: “It is almost impossible to dispute that at the historical roots of Christianity lie some visionary

³⁹⁷ For biblical and theological scholars who accept the historicity of the appearances, see Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus*, 269; Raymond E. Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (Mahwah: Paulist, 1973), 89-92; idem, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology*, 169; Craig, *Jesus’ Resurrection: Fact or Figment?*, 31-39; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996), 136; Crossan, “The Resurrection: Historical Event or Theological Explanation?: A Dialogue,” 33; idem, “Bodily-Resurrection Faith,” 176; Stephen T. Davis, “Seeing the Risen Jesus,” in Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O’Collins (eds.), *The Resurrection: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Resurrection of Jesus* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1997), 126-147; James Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 841-857, 864; O’Collins, *Believing in the Resurrection*, 61-79; Vermes, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 17, 92, 102, 108, 120, 140, 148, 150; Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 686-696.

³⁹⁸ E.P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 280. Cf. 11, 13.

experiences of the first Christians, who understood them as appearances of Jesus, raised by God from the dead.”³⁹⁹

The Origins of Easter Faith

But the empty tomb and appearances are not all we have. As a result of these visual experiences, Ehrman writes that “Historians, of course, have no difficulty speaking about belief in Jesus’ resurrection, since this is a matter of public record. It is a historical fact that some of Jesus’ followers came to believe that he had been raised from the dead soon after his execution. We know some of these believers by name; one of them, the apostle Paul, claims to have seen him alive after his death.”⁴⁰⁰ Notice that no other view of the afterlife is affirmed and defended by the earliest Christians. So strong was their belief in the resurrected Jesus that they proclaimed him as the “Son of God,” the “Jewish Messiah,” and “Lord of All.”⁴⁰¹ Moreover, without these beliefs, “the religious movement [Jesus] started would have died with him. There never would have been a Christianity.”⁴⁰² Unlike Second Temple Judaism, the resurrection was at the front and center of the newly formed faith.

Here too Ehrman is in agreement with many New Testament historians.⁴⁰³ Indeed, whatever critics may think about the empty tomb and the appearances, the first

³⁹⁹ Dunn, *The Evidence for Jesus*, 75.

⁴⁰⁰ Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University, 2004), 276.

⁴⁰¹ Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium*, 234.

⁴⁰² Ehrman, *Peter, Paul and Mary Magdalene*, 49.

⁴⁰³ See Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus*, 230; Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus*, 127; idem, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology*, 169; Craig, *Jesus’ Resurrection: Fact or Figment?*, 31-39; Ladd, *I Believe in the Resurrection of Jesus*, 25; Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*, 91; Lapide, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 69, 70; Kenan B. Osborne, *The Resurrection of Jesus: New Considerations for Its Theological Interpretation* (New York: Paulist, 1994), 103, cf. 117; Perkins, “The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth,” 423-442; Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 9, 10, 261, 272, 276, 309, 322, 374, 568, 685, 705.

Christians for whom we have evidence for at least believed that Jesus had been raised from the dead (and not ascended, assumed, or immortalized to heaven). This belief, moreover, was at the very heart of earliest Christianity. N.T. Wright recognized that “the historical study of early Christian practice and hope leaves us no choice but to conclude that this unfortunate belief was what all early Christians held. Indeed, they professed that it was the very centre of their life.”⁴⁰⁴ Not only is this belief “unanimous” and “unambiguous,” but the sources we have are “sober,” “critical,” and “reserved,” without a shred of “extravagant enthusiasm” which we would expect to hear in legendary accounts.⁴⁰⁵

Phrases referring to this belief are probably the oldest and most distinctive in early Christianity.⁴⁰⁶ Indicated by the Greek words *egreirein*, a transitive verb that means “to awaken” or “to raise up,” and *anastanai*, which means “to arise,” reference to belief in Jesus’ resurrection is found in many places (Rom. 4:24, 25, 6:4, 7:4, 8:11; 1 Cor. 6:14, 15:4, 12, 20; 1 Cor. 6:14, 2 Cor. 4:14, Gal. 1:1, Col. 2:12, 1 Thes. 1:10; Eph. 1:20; 2 Tim. 2:8; Heb. 13:20; 1 Pet. 1:21; Acts 3:15, 4:10, 5:30, 10:40, 13:30, 37). As Gerald O’Collins rightly observes: “The primary claim was not that Jesus’ cause continued or that the disciples had been “raised” to a new consciousness and the life of faith . . . , but that the crucified Jesus had been personally brought from the state of death to that of a new and lasting life.”⁴⁰⁷

⁴⁰⁴ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 705.

⁴⁰⁵ Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, 125.

⁴⁰⁶ As Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus*, p. 230, says “Because of the multiple attestation and its appearance in Paul’s earliest letter, all presumption is in favor of supposing that we have here, as with ‘God raised Jesus from the dead,’ a very primitive way of speaking.”

⁴⁰⁷ Gerald O’Collins, “The Resurrection of Jesus,” in René Latourelle, (ed.), *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 769.

Other noteworthy factors accompanying the disciples' belief include the transformation of the first disciples from doubters to bold proclaimers of the resurrection (Acts 4, 5); the apostolic preaching, which was almost exclusively centered on the risen Jesus (Acts 2:22ff., 3:15, 26);⁴⁰⁸ the early and successful growth of the church (cf. Acts 2:41, 47, 4:4, 6:1);⁴⁰⁹ the drastic change that took place in Jewish social structures; the origin of the Christian understanding of the eucharist;⁴¹⁰ the new meaning poured into water baptism;⁴¹¹ the Sabbath being changed from Saturday to Sunday;⁴¹² the first disciples' willingness to die for their belief (cf. Acts 2:41-47, 4:1-4),⁴¹³ including the resistance they showed against the Roman Empire;⁴¹⁴ the fact that within a few months or years after Jesus' life they spoke about him in divine terms;⁴¹⁵ they had a heightened respect for the physical world;⁴¹⁶ the early conversion of Jewish priests (Acts 6:7) and other enemies of the faith (e.g., Paul: Phil. 3:4-6).⁴¹⁷ Not to be overlooked, the listing of Peter as the *first* one to see an appearance (Luke 24:34; 1 Cor. 15:5) is significant, testifying to their Easter beliefs.

⁴⁰⁸ Gerald O'Collins, *Jesus Risen: An Historical, Fundamental and Systematic Examination of Christ's Resurrection* (New York: Paulist, 1987), 89, 90. See also Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 480.

⁴⁰⁹ Cf. Gerald O'Collins, *Easter Faith: Believing in the Risen Jesus* (Mahwah: Paulist, 2003), 40.

⁴¹⁰ Richard Swinburne, "Evidence for the Resurrection," in Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O'Collins (eds.), *The Resurrection: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Resurrection of Jesus* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1997), 207-212.

⁴¹¹ Romans 6:1-6 and Colossians 2:12 demonstrate that the meaning of this sacrament was intimately linked to Jesus' death and resurrection. The practice of baptism in the early church was probably an adaptation of proselyte baptism practiced in Judaism. The change in meaning of the act of baptism by the church points to the resurrection as a necessary precondition for such a change.

⁴¹² Richard Swinburne, *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2003), 163-170.

⁴¹³ Lapide, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 126; Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, 280.

⁴¹⁴ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 570.

⁴¹⁵ Dunn, *The Evidence for Jesus*, 61-63.

⁴¹⁶ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 582, 583, cf. 603, 610.

⁴¹⁷ F.F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?*, 6th ed. (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity, 1981), 77. Bruce thinks that Paul's conversion is one the best evidential arguments for the resurrection.

In order to appreciate the remarkable modification of earliest *belief* in Jesus' bodily resurrection, one should understand the prevailing views of the afterlife in Judaism at the time.⁴¹⁸ Jews held that (1) all people, or at least a large group of the Jewish nation, would be raised from the dead together (not one individual apart from the rest); (2) the resurrection would occur at the eschaton, never in the middle of history (as in the case of Jesus); (3) none of the risen would play a role in the divine judgment (according to the Christians, however, the Risen One was the judge of all humankind); (4) the Messiah would not die, much less rise from the dead. Nor did they think that (5) God, or YHWH, would be raised from the dead in human form (cf. 2 Clement 1:1).

Conversely, the first Christians proclaimed specific things about Jesus' resurrection: (1) they believed in a resurrected and *crucified rabbi*, which was seen by Jews as a curse from God (cf. Deut 21:23); (2) they claimed that the general resurrection had somehow already begun (1 Cor. 15:20-23); (3) they unanimously placed the resurrection at the center of their message, excluding all other views of the afterlife (unlike the Jews, whose resurrection doctrine was peripheral and even debatable among other eschatological beliefs); (4) the Christians argued that the resurrected body was "incorruptible" and "imperishable" (unlike the Jews, who never commented on the nature of the risen body); (5) they spoke of God's Kingdom as having come—and still having to come—a very nuanced position to be in; (6) and they propagated the good news to *all* people, regardless of race, gender, or social status—something the Jews did not feel the need to do, either before and during the rise of Christianity. All of these drastic changes should prompt historians to ask: what could have caused these major modifications?

⁴¹⁸ The definitive work on the Second Temple Jewish views of the afterlife at the time of Jesus is N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*.

The Significance of Earliest Christian Worship

Another salient component of earliest Christianity is the church's worship and devotional life. This phenomenon has been discussed by New Testament scholars such as Larry Hurtado, Richard Bauckham, and James Dunn. Scholars working in early Christian worship rarely mention the antecedent causes that were responsible for bringing these practices into being, and their work has profound implications for resurrection apologetics.

First, the New Testament writers presupposed Jewish monotheism (Rom. 3:28-30; 1 Cor. 8:1-6; John 10:30), but the earliest Christians infused belief in one God with a definitive, new meaning at an exceptionally early date. Says Bauckham: "With the inclusion of Jesus in the unique identity of YHWH, the faith of the Shema is affirmed and maintained, but everything the Shema requires of God's people is now focused on Jesus. Exclusive devotion is now given to Jesus, but Jesus does not thereby replace or compete with God the Father, since he himself belongs to the unique divine identity."⁴¹⁹ The highest Christology was accompanied by a particular pattern of liturgical worship.⁴²⁰

Unlike Judaism, Christians held that redemption was not found through obedience to Torah. Rather, all people, regardless of race, gender, or ethnicity, could find salvation by accepting Jesus. "The Torah is thereby shown not to be the basis of redemption, and so it cannot be made obligatory for Gentile Christians."⁴²¹ Likewise, Hurtado lists six cultic actions in earliest Christian worship that distinguish it from Second-Temple Jewish

⁴¹⁹ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 106.

⁴²⁰ *Ibid.*, 127-151.

⁴²¹ Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 132, 133. Cf. 165.

worship. Although there is some precedent and analogy between the two, the earliest believers took worship one step further by giving Jesus cultic devotion—the best indication that Jesus was attributed with divinity. These mutations, Hurtado’s words, are “a direct outgrowth from, and indeed a variety of, the ancient Jewish tradition. But an earlier stage it exhibited a sudden and significant difference in character from Jewish devotion.”⁴²²

These uncontroversial practices include the following: (1) Prayer was offered to God *through* Jesus Christ (e.g., Rom 1:8); (2) In the Church’s rituals, Jesus was invoked and confessed (this implies that Jesus was given a divine status); (3) Jesus’ name was invoked in the ritual of baptism; (4) The association of Jesus with the Lord’s Supper connotes that he was a living divine power who own the meal and presides over it. This means that he was seen as Lord of the entire Christian congregation. This was striking at the time, especially considering that it was celebrated in contradistinction to the cult meals of the pagan gods in Roman religion; (5) In the early church’s hymns, the Christians literally sang to Jesus by using Old Testament Psalms, interpreted Christologically; (6) The use of prophetic speech in the context of Christian worship was seen and experienced as the voice of the risen Jesus.⁴²³

Noting that there is nothing compelling in Second Temple Judaism to compel the first Christians to fabricate these cultic actions (though Hurtado argues that the Jewish veneration of the patriarchs, heroic figures, principal angels, and personified attributes of God assisted the first believers with the conceptual categories necessary for verbally

⁴²² Larry W. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism*, 2d. ed. (New York: T & T Clark, 2003), 99.

⁴²³ *Ibid.*, 100-114.

articulating what happened to Jesus),⁴²⁴ Hurtado says early devotion was characteristically expressed in terms of Jesus' special relationship to God, and in conjunction with God's action in the world.⁴²⁵ In the earliest evidence we have (Paul's letters), Jesus holds a status of divinity, or at least participating in divinity.⁴²⁶ This is attested by Paul's belief in Jesus' pre-existence, which denotes the fact that Jesus' origin and meaning lie exclusively in God, and that his appearance in history corresponds to his role in the redemption of the human race.⁴²⁷

Contending that there are two ways to interpret the pertinent evidence from the Second Temple Jewish era, Bauckham argues that the Christians' earliest beliefs about Jesus were not possible by "applying to Jesus a Jewish category of semi-divine intermediary status, but by identifying Jesus directly with the one God of Israel, including Jesus in the unique identity of this one God."⁴²⁸ He analyzes biblical passages such as Deuteronomy 6:4-6 and the Decalogue. Second Temple Jews were strictly monotheistic well before the origins of the Christian movement. Thus, the inclusion of Jesus along with God cries out for some sort of extraordinary explanation.

At the time of Jesus, Jews understood God as the exclusive Creator and Ruler of the universe. Thus, Bauckham: "To our question, 'In what did Second Temple Judaism consider the uniqueness of the one God to consist, what distinguished God as unique from all other reality, including beings worshipped as gods by Gentiles?,' the answer given again and again, in a wide variety of Second Temple Jewish literature, is that the only true God, YHWH, the God of Israel, is the sole Creator of all things and sole Ruler

⁴²⁴ Ibid., 17-92, 123, 124.

⁴²⁵ Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 52.

⁴²⁶ Ibid., 104.

⁴²⁷ Ibid., 126. Cf. 118-126.

⁴²⁸ Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel*, 3.

of all things.”⁴²⁹ As in the case of Hurtado, Jesus is suddenly seen as the creator along with God.⁴³⁰ As Bauckham rightly insists:

if we attend carefully and accurately, on the one hand, to the ways in which Second Temple Judaism characterized the unique identity of the one and only God and, on the other hand, to what New Testament writers say about Jesus, it becomes abundantly clear that New Testament writers include Jesus in the unique identity of the one God. They do so carefully, deliberately, consistently and comprehensively, by including Jesus in precisely those divine characteristics which for Second Temple Judaism distinguished the one God as unique. All New Testament Christology is, in this sense, very high Christology, stated in the highest terms available in first-century Jewish theology.⁴³¹

On the one hand, Second Temple Jews viewed YHWH as the only sovereign being. On the other hand, Christians saw the Exalted Jesus as sovereign.⁴³² While Jews held that YHWH was higher than all angelic beings, the earliest Christians affirmed that Jesus was higher than all angels.⁴³³ While YHWH has a unique divine name in the Old Testament, so Christians also give Jesus the same unique name. Lastly, Jews held that God was to receive exclusive worship, not worship alongside of other pagan deities.⁴³⁴ The first Christians exclusively worshipped Jesus. No other gods in the Greco-Roman world deserved honorable worship alongside of him.

But James Dunn is quick to add that the Scriptural witness in support of worshipping *Jesus* is unable to point us in any conclusive direction: “the use of *proskynein* in the sense of offering worship to Jesus seems to be rather limited.”⁴³⁵ With respect to the early church’s prayer, hymns, sacred times, places, meals, and people, “the data is more complex and the implications not so clearly drawn.”⁴³⁶

⁴²⁹ Ibid., 9; cf. 10, 11

⁴³⁰ Ibid., 87.

⁴³¹ Ibid., 32.

⁴³² Ibid., 23.

⁴³³ Ibid., 23, 24.

⁴³⁴ Ibid., 84.

⁴³⁵ James Dunn, *The First Christians Worship Jesus?: The New Testament Evidence* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 12.

⁴³⁶ Ibid., 39.

For him the whole notion of worshipping Jesus is misleading. The question is not so much “Did the first Christians worship Jesus?” as much as it should be “Was early worship possible without Jesus?” Worship, therefore, was not possible without including Jesus *and* God in the power of the Spirit: “Worship of Jesus that is not worship of God through Jesus, or, more completely, worship of God through Jesus and in the Spirit, is not Christian worship.”⁴³⁷ In Dunn’s reading, then, the worship of Christ at the expense of including God the Father and the Holy Spirit is tantamount to committing “Jesus-olatry.” Although the first believers did not explicitly formulate a doctrine of the Trinity, it was this novel understanding that was hugely significant and complements the other modifications mentioned by Bauckham and Hurtado.

Hence, the single biggest distinction in earliest Christianity was its insistence on worshipping a person who once walked the earth. This in itself was a huge mutation and also has no parallel, let alone linguistic parallel, in Judaism. They included the teachings of his earthly ministry. This was probably based on their innovative theology of Jesus’ resurrection body (i.e., the same body that died was the same body that rose from the grave). The risen Jesus is the same Jesus that the disciples knew during his life: “in what became the dominant view, Jesus’ real human and historical reality remained as crucial as the heavenly glory that he was believed to share.”⁴³⁸ Moreover, there is hardly any indication that there was “any controversy or serious variance about this exalted place of Jesus among the various other Christian circles with which he was acquainted.”⁴³⁹

Indeed, Judaism forbade the apotheosis or the divinization of human persons. This makes Christian devotion all the more remarkable given that Christianity was seen

⁴³⁷ Ibid., 6.

⁴³⁸ Hurtado, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God?*, 55.

⁴³⁹ Ibid., 135. Cf. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 167, 173, 182, 183, 203, 215, 605.

as an early sect of Judaism which also held that Jesus was divine.⁴⁴⁰ Bauckham here complements Hurtado: “When New Testament Christology is read with this Jewish theological context in mind [i.e. a strictly monotheistic context], it becomes clear that, from the earliest post-Easter beginnings of Christology onwards, early Christians included Jesus, precisely and unambiguously, within the unique identity of the one true God of Israel. They did so by including Jesus in the unique, defining characteristics by which Jewish monotheism identified God as unique.”⁴⁴¹

Moreover, according to Bauckham, we can safely surmise that the Christology of the first Christians was already the highest Christology: “one should note the most significant difference between earliest Christianity and other contemporary religious groups: the place of the exalted Jesus in the religious life, devotion, or piety of its adherents.”⁴⁴²

Worship of Jesus was not in competition for the devotion given to God, but both were included by believers.⁴⁴³ Although the first Christians considered themselves strict monotheists, what made them so different from the Jews was that they introduced a binitarian devotional pattern directed to God *and* Christ alone. This was heretical in Judaism because it contravened the prayers, hymns, and devotion reserved for the God of biblical tradition. There is simply no analogy in the Second-Temple period to accommodate this binitarian pattern of worship.

In a similar vein, Christian devotion also placed strict demands on converts to renounce all forms of pagan worship, demanding an exclusivist devotion to Christ and

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid., 91, 92.

⁴⁴¹ Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel*, ix.

⁴⁴² Hurtado, *One God, One Lord*, 99.

⁴⁴³ Ibid., 100.

God.⁴⁴⁴ Thus Hurtado: “We cannot appreciate early Christian worship, unless we keep before our eyes the fact that for Gentile Christians it represented a *replacement cultus*. It was at one and the same time both a religious commitment and a renunciation, a stark and demanding devotional stance with profound repercussions.”⁴⁴⁵ This exclusivist approach obligated converts to abandon certain aspects of common life, and in some cases this created tensions within their family life.⁴⁴⁶

The sustenance of the Christian understanding monotheism in the face of the Roman religions was another striking feature of early worship. The worship of *one* God was at clearly at odds with the polytheistic belief that the gods could be worshipped in any combination. Pagans could not understand why they could not add worship to Jesus alongside the worship of other gods.⁴⁴⁷ Since Christianity was one religion competing in a marketplace of religions, and considering it had an exclusivist stance, there must have been some other feature that made it powerfully attractive to outsiders.⁴⁴⁸ Early worship attracted outsiders because of the way in which it changed its adherents.

Another reason why it spread so quickly had to do with the adversarial encounter of other religions which drove and shaped the movement.⁴⁴⁹ Martyrdom was “the most

⁴⁴⁴ Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 483, 484, 650.

⁴⁴⁵ Hurtado, *At the Origins of Christian Worship*, 4.

⁴⁴⁶ The Romans allowed for many different forms of religious expression. Thus, it was unique for the Christians to enter the highly diverse and pious religious scene of the Roman world and claim that all religions other than Christianity were illicit.

⁴⁴⁷ Hurtado, *At the Origins of Christian Worship*, 18. Cf. 39. “Likewise with scant basis are the occasional scholarly assertions of a ‘trend’ or ‘tendency’ toward monotheism in the Roman period. To be sure, among some sophisticated writers in the ancient world there were attempts to posit a unity behind the diversity of gods. But this is hardly monotheism as we know it in classical forms of Judaism, Christianity or Islam, in which one deity is worshipped to the exclusion of all others.”

⁴⁴⁸ The quick success of Christianity partly depended on showing where pagan religious devotion was in error. This, in turn, provided an opportunity to share the Christian message of the forgiveness of sins through Jesus himself.

⁴⁴⁹ Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 77, 402.

vivid form in which devotion to Jesus was expressed in the earliest centuries.⁴⁵⁰ Dying for one's beliefs indicated to the public on a large scale that some Christians were willing to go to any length of penalty to remain faithful followers of Jesus. Of course, this made outsiders curious and attracted them to investigate the newly found faith.

Christ's followers made the radical claim that Jesus must be worshipped because he was Messiah—the mediator of cosmic redemption.⁴⁵¹ This is truly remarkable given that Jesus' messianic titles and the worship given to him occurred only *after he was crucified* in a Greco-Roman cultural and religious milieu. Another important aspect is that the earliest Christian tradition of worship can be traced back to an early time period, soon after the crucifixion. This precludes the idea the idea that Christian practices substantially evolved decades after the Christ event.⁴⁵² Early devotion to Jesus cannot be attributed to pagan religious influences on their Jewish-Christian thought, even to Jews who were living in the Diaspora.⁴⁵³ The antiquity of the practices reaches too far back in time.

Assessing the Evidence for Jesus' Resurrection

Responsible historians recognize that historiography is not about pronouncing mathematically certain conclusions about the past.⁴⁵⁴ Rather, it is about ascertaining probabilistic conclusions about the past. Some events are more likely to be true than others. Ehrman, for instance, departs from many other historians when he denies that the resurrection hypothesis (cast as an historical inference) is the best explanation of the

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid., 619. Cf. 619-624.

⁴⁵¹ Hurtado, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God?*, 4, 5.

⁴⁵² Ibid., 29, 30.

⁴⁵³ Ibid., 38-42.

⁴⁵⁴ Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 223, 228.

evidence.⁴⁵⁵ Instead a different scenario is proposed by him: Jesus taught that God was soon going to intervene in history. Because Jesus' disciples loved him, they were convinced that God would eventually vindicate him as the Messiah. After Jesus was crucified, the disciples had visions of him (visual experiences akin to the widow's bereavement experiences⁴⁵⁶), remembered his messianic teachings about himself, and decided that he must be risen from the dead.⁴⁵⁷

Now, apologists might play a significant role in helping doubters and unbelievers to overcome intellectual obstacles set in the path of faith. Let us now turn to some of the most salient challenges of skeptics in the post-Vatican II era in light of the previous facts which are widely accepted by the majority of New Testament scholars who study the subject.

The first objection is that *there are too many contradictions in the resurrection narratives for them to be considered reliable*. But this complaint shows a hesitancy to take the evidence that was tentatively established in the New Testament documents

⁴⁵⁵ For scholars who claim that the resurrection is the *best* explanation of the New Testament evidence, see Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity, 1987), 100-106; Brown, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology*, 162-170; Craig, in *Jesus' Resurrection: Fact or Figment?*, 31-39; Christopher Bryan, *The Resurrection of the Messiah* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2011), 159-172; Stephen T. Davis, "Is Belief in the Resurrection Rational?" *Philo* 2 (1999): 57-58; Dunn, *The Evidence for Jesus*, 76; Lapide, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 125, 126; Michael Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity, 2010), 582-606; Gerald O'Collins, *Jesus Risen: An Historical, Fundamental and Systematic Examination of Christ's Resurrection* (New York: Paulist, 1987), 100-108; Richard Swinburne, "Evidence for the Resurrection," in Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O'Collins, (eds), *The Resurrection: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Resurrection of Jesus* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1997), 201; Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 8, 10, 686, 716-718.

⁴⁵⁶ As a result of the grieving process, widows and widowers can sometimes experience their recent deceased loved ones. These vivid experiences are known as "bereavement experiences." The pioneering work on these experiences came from the medical doctor Dewi Rees, "The Hallucinations of Widowhood," *British Medical Journal* 4 (1971): 37-41; idem, *Death and Bereavement: The Psychological, Religious and Cultural Interfaces*, 2d ed. (New York: Wiley, 2001); idem, *Pointers to Eternity* (Talypon, Wales: Y Lofa, 2010). For a comparison between bereavement experiences and the resurrection appearances of Jesus, see the excellent essay by Gerald O'Collins, "The Resurrection and Bereavement Experiences," *Irish Theological Quarterly*, 76.3 (2011): 224-237. This essay has been reprinted in *Believing in the Resurrection*, 175-191.

⁴⁵⁷ Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 233-236.

seriously. Since we have already admitted to certain facts as evidence, this objection acts as a smokescreen in taking the explanation of that evidence seriously. New Testament historians are not trying to demonstrate the resurrection of Jesus, and so they admit that other possible explanations might account for the data. The more interesting question, however, is whether the resurrection hypothesis is the best explanation of the evidence.

Even if there are contradictions in the resurrection narratives, this would not be any more significant than the report of a past event by a number of individuals with different perspectives. The different theologies of the Evangelists can correspond to historical figures.

Although it may be the case that no harmonization in the Gospels is possible, “these irreconcilable divergences . . . agree on one thing: Jesus appeared to certain disciples after his death; he proved himself living and was proclaimed to have been risen from the dead. That is the centre, the core, where all the traditions meet.”⁴⁵⁸

So, notwithstanding the legends, exaggerations, and the obvious use of imagination portrayed in the Gospels, this does not preclude the possibility of historicity. Blomberg concluded, “the similarities far outweigh the differences. And of the differences which do appear, many simply reflect varying theological interpretations of the same historical events without calling into question the fundamental historicity of the events themselves.”⁴⁵⁹

Considering that the appearances were in history, but still had a mysterious, eschatological quality about them, we should not be surprised to see some “contradictions” in the texts. The different theological emphases in the narratives might

⁴⁵⁸ Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, 129. Cf. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 614.

⁴⁵⁹ Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, 43. Cf. 131, 143.

reflect different accommodations directed to the original readers. Likewise, it would be a mistake to consider the narratives purely legendary because they are not “word for word” translations of what Jesus said (or that the narratives are not chronological listings of what happened first, second, and so on).

We must also keep in mind that we are dealing with texts that have been analyzed and pulled apart more than any other work of literature in the past 300 years. Clearly we *should* expect to see a few “contradictions” in them. Be that as it may, no reputable historian who finds a few of these discrepancies in her sources would automatically conclude that they are purely legendary. Many historians argue that some contradictions may provide greater weight to the reliability of the central events reported in them. These contradictions would give the careful reader the impression that the story was not contrived.

Lastly, even if the Gospels were hopelessly contradictory (which they are not), this would not leave us with nothing. *We still have to reckon with Paul’s account in 1 Corinthians 15.*

The second argument against the resurrection hypothesis is that *the oral traditions undergirding the Gospels are unreliable*. Ehrman, for instance, claims that cultural anthropologists have shown that oral means of preserving religious teachings are usually unreliable.

But these studies do not necessarily apply in the case of ancient rabbinic oral tradition. More important for our purposes is that this objection confuses the two steps in the argument (step one is about gathering the evidence, and step two is about explaining the evidence). No matter the uncertainties surrounding the agreed upon

evidence, the reader is already expected to concede the historicity of the empty tomb, the appearances, and the origin of the disciples' faith.

Let us try and address this objection from another perspective. The critic may be confusing the deposit of oral teaching and the way it was expressed (or applied) in different circumstances. As I. Howard Marshall observed: "If Jesus meant so much to his followers, then it is overwhelmingly improbable that they remembered so little about him, or that they so completely refashioned the content of their memories."⁴⁶⁰

Moreover, the fact that we have multiple sources within such a short generation after Jesus's ministry makes us fortunate as ancient historians. As Ehrman himself states: "Therefore, if there is a tradition about Jesus that is preserved in more than one of these documents, no one of them could have made it up, since the others knew of it as well, independently. If a tradition is found in several of these sources, then the likelihood of its going back to the very beginning of the tradition from which they all ultimately derive, back to the historical Jesus himself, is significantly improved."⁴⁶¹ Usually ancient historians have much less material to work with than historical Jesus scholars. Usually in ancient history one or two sources renders the reported fact unimpeachable. But in the case of Jesus' resurrection, we have multiple, independent sources. It can also be argued that there was an insufficient amount of time for legends to accrue because of the living apostolic restraints at the time. More than one or two generations might have been needed for the Evangelists (and Paul) to completely refashion their depictions of Jesus.

⁴⁶⁰ I. Howard Marshall, *I Believe in the Historical Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 219.

⁴⁶¹ Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 217.

Lastly, one might mention Paul and the ancient creed he recites in 1 Corinthians 15. Because this creed can be traced back well before the writing of 1 Corinthians,⁴⁶² it seems to nullify Ehrman's concerns about the circumstantial reasons for holding to the evidences that he already agrees with. N.T. Wright, for instance, states that it "was probably formulated within the first two or three years after Easter itself" and is "the earliest Christian tradition."⁴⁶³ Walter Kasper concurs; it goes back to "30 AD."⁴⁶⁴ James Dunn dates it to "within months of Jesus' death."⁴⁶⁵ The atheist critic Gerd Lüdemann says it can be traced back to within "30 and 33 A.D."⁴⁶⁶ Further, the sources used by the author(s) of the ancient creed in 1 Corinthians must stretch back even further to the events described in the creed itself.

*Likewise, the Gospels not written by eyewitnesses. And they were written too far after Christ to be considered reliable.*⁴⁶⁷ Once more this objector (Ehrman) confuses the notion of evidence and explanation. Even if the Gospels were not written by eyewitnesses, this does nothing to undercut the evidence that has already been deduced by him.

Nonetheless, let us still try and respond to his criticism. Ehrman is well aware that later datings of the Gospels does not necessarily render them completely unreliable.⁴⁶⁸ Though scholars generally do not believe that we have eyewitness

⁴⁶² The best discussion of the origins of 1 Cor. 15:3-8 can be found in William Lane Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus*, 1-50.

⁴⁶³ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 319.

⁴⁶⁴ Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, 125.

⁴⁶⁵ James Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 855.

⁴⁶⁶ Gerd Lüdemann, *The Resurrection of Jesus: History, Experience, Theology*, trans. John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 38.

⁴⁶⁷ Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 217.

⁴⁶⁸ Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 216, 217. This is a point that even Bultmann admitted.

accounts, a strong case can be made for the eyewitness *traditions* behind them.⁴⁶⁹ As illustrated by Lapide: “To blame the rabbis and evangelists for deception or to accuse them of lying would have been as foreign to the Jews and Jewish Christians of that time as an accusation of ‘embellishment’ against Van Gogh or of the corruption of history against Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* would be to us.”⁴⁷⁰ According to Dulles: “Anglicans and Orthodox, as well as Roman Catholics, have generally rejected the Protestant position, in so far as this is purely Biblicist, and have insisted that the Bible cannot be the rule of faith except when conjoined with a continuous Church tradition. In this perspective, which is fundamentally Catholic, the very sections of the New Testament which the liberals tend to discount as too far removed from the events can be seen as providing privileged interpretations, for, as [John Henry] Newman pointed out, events of great importance require a considerable span of time in order to be rightly comprehended.”⁴⁷¹ Later compilers may have more well-rounded evidence from various perspectives at their disposal to determine what should be included in the most up to date reporting. Historians do not need earlier sources to ensure that their case is more historically trustworthy.

What is more, the “eyewitness argument” does not seem to apply in the case of Paul. Paul himself wrote that he saw an appearance (1 Cor. 9:1). And he was originally an enemy of earliest Christianity. He did not expect Jesus to appear to him. He became a believer well after the Christian movement began in Jerusalem. The ancient creed

⁴⁶⁹ Cf. Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

⁴⁷⁰ Pinchas Lapide, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, trans. Wilhelm C. Linss (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1982; reprint, Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 110.

⁴⁷¹ Avery Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church* (Clarendon, Oxford University, 1987), 97.

found in 1 Corinthians 15, moreover, was formulated within years (or even months) after the crucifixion.

Ehrman's next challenge is that *the evidence is biased*. For him the evidence is furnished by individuals who already believed in the resurrection and so cannot be trusted by critical historians. Here the principle of disinterestedness seems to be upheld. But again this challenge has nothing to do with the evidence already established by Ehrman in the first step.

Second, it should also be said that bias explains everything and so explains nothing. Notwithstanding the issue of bias, the resurrection hypothesis is said to be the *best* explanation of the *known* evidence, not the *only* explanation. Other explanations are certainly possible, but Ehrman (and the other critics) have not provided one so far. Alternative explanations can be given, but unless Ehrman can provide positive evidence to establish that the early Christian movement remained deliberately silent about some alleged, hitherto unknown source(s), historians remain completely within their rights to use the New Testament documents to make arguments about the origins of resurrection faith. He should use the evidence that is currently available instead of constructing a causal theory on the basis of sheer possibility or of silence.

What is more, it is true no historical account is written from a neutral, objective standpoint. But this does not mean that the Evangelists could not (or did not) report anything accurate about the Jesus. Ehrman himself explains what those facts were! Undoubtedly the Gospels are not biographical in the modern sense of the term. Unlike modern biographies, the Gospels are only concerned with the last two to three years of Jesus's life. Nor can the Gospels be classified as "lives of Christ," or as aretalogies.

Rather, they are to be classified in the line of ancient Greco-Roman biographies or Greek and Jewish “historiography.”⁴⁷² Given the genre of the Gospels, the Evangelists were somewhat concerned about presenting accurate depictions of Jesus (cf. Luke: 1:1-4) in the face of different situations facing the earliest churches.

Fourth, the issue of bias seems to be drastically undercut in the case of Paul (and the 500). Paul was not always a believer, and presumably some of the 500 did not know or believe in Jesus either. To be sure, Paul *challenges* the Corinthians to ask any of the 500 who were alive at the time of his writing to convince them of the reality of the appearances (1 Cor. 15:6).

The next argument is that *other figures of history were said to perform miracles and be resurrected*. Ehrman lists figures such as Apollonius of Tyana, Honi the Circle Drawer, Hanina ben Dosa, and the Roman Emperor Vespasian.⁴⁷³ If we already accept Jesus’ resurrection, Ehrman says, then why couldn’t we say these figures were raised too? Let me say from the outset that apologists should not hold that Jesus was the only figure of history ever to be raised. This closed-minded attitude is detrimental to the virtue of open-mindedness about the probability of miracles. But notice that the admission of special divine acts in other religio-cultural contexts does not undercut the credibility of *Jesus’* resurrection either.

Second, even if there is evidence for these divine acts, this would not mean that the evidence is equally compelling in all cases. Poorly evidenced miracles scarcely rule out the validity of well attested evidence in other scenarios, especially in the historical case for Jesus’ resurrection. By contrast, in these other scenarios there is minimal

⁴⁷² Craig Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 107.

⁴⁷³ Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted*, 172.

evidence appearing literally hundreds of years after the original event.⁴⁷⁴ And they are not usually corroborated by multiple, independent sources. Consequently, the evidence for these special divine acts allow for many plausible explanations.

Third, Ehrman asserts that many Christians naively reject miracle claims in other religious contexts because they are not found in Scripture or church teaching. But this is a textbook example of committing the genetic fallacy: how one comes to believe in X does not have anything to do with the truth of X. Christians might believe in the resurrection of Jesus because of the circumstances they found themselves in (i.e., upbringing, living in a Christian culture), but this does not mean that it is a false belief or that the resurrection hypothesis is not the best explanation of the evidence. Many Christians (and atheists, agnostics, and other religionists) hold to specific beliefs and reject other ones for poor reasons.

Both faith and reason can lead individuals to certain conclusions. But in the case of critical historians, they do not claim to establish, demonstrate or prove the resurrection. Instead the resurrection hypothesis is cast as a piece of inductive reasoning on the basis of agreed upon evidence.

The next argument is that *historical understanding is relegated to multiple causes, not just one*. It is true that the early Church could have had more than one cause for its existence, but this would not prevent historians from positing Jesus' resurrection as the ultimate cause that set off a chain reaction of additional causal conditions that brought the Christian movement into full bloom. Various causes have different values and contribute variously to forming historical phenomena. True, historians rarely affirm that entire

⁴⁷⁴ Gary Habermas, "Resurrection Claims in Non-Christian Religions," *Religious Studies*, 25.2 (June 1989): 167-177.

movements can be accounted for by a single cause. Many conditions surrounding the primary event under consideration, the resurrection of Jesus, contributed to its ongoing influence.

Larry Hurtado, for instance, has recently outlined and explained some of the many reasons why the earliest Christian movement spread at the astounding rate it did. First, it began in Jerusalem – a city that allowed for many persons to hear the Good News in order for the first disciples to take the message out to a wider world.⁴⁷⁵ Outsiders found the strict nature of Christian worship attractive⁴⁷⁶ including its exclusive stance with respect to Christianity's relationship to all other religions.⁴⁷⁷ Christianity, moreover, was unlike any other religion at the time. It did not discriminate on the basis of gender or social class. It called on everyone to repent and believe in the Gospel.⁴⁷⁸ Christian worship was more intense than the conventional liturgies of Judaism.⁴⁷⁹ The earliest Christian worship featured the belief that God was active in the midst of ritual action.⁴⁸⁰ Lastly, says Hurtado, the Christian attitude in worship was not passive, but one in which the believer could expect to be changed by the Spirit. The early Church's intense charismatic experience of the risen Jesus in the context of worship was attractive to outsiders.⁴⁸¹

⁴⁷⁵ Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 195, 196.

⁴⁷⁶ Larry W. Hurtado, *At the Origins of Christian Worship: The Context and Character of Earliest Christian Devotion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 4; idem, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 483, 484, 650.

⁴⁷⁷ Hurtado, *At the Origins of Christian Worship*, 18; cf. 39; idem, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 77, 402.

⁴⁷⁸ Hurtado, *At the Origins of Christian Worship*, 46.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid., 53, 55.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid., 56, 57.

⁴⁸¹ Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 134–53, 619–24, 649–53.

*Bereavement experiences can account for the appearances.*⁴⁸² Offering this explanation as a sheer possibility, Ehrman and other critics say that the appearances can be explained by the experience that widows and widowers sometimes have of their deceased spouses. Undoubtedly, bereavement experiences have similar characteristics to what the evidence has concluded about the appearances.

For one thing, both groups find themselves immersed in grief after the recent death of a loved one. Second, both groups came into contact with the beloved. Third, these meetings were not initiated by the living, but came from “the other side.” And as a result of these experiences, the living felt enlightened and empowered.

Notwithstanding these four similarities, there are many differences that preclude this alternative explanation from being taken seriously.⁴⁸³ First, they usually occur to *widows*, not to *disciples* of dead religious leaders. As O’Collins writes: “before the ‘bereavement,’ the disciples of Jesus had enjoyed a different kind of relationship with a remarkably different kind of person who made quite extraordinary claims about his identity and mission. This dissimilarity affects the ‘point of departure’ for the proposed analogy.”⁴⁸⁴

Second, one might argue that Paul had no acquaintance with Jesus during his earthly ministry. Thus the experience of grief would not apply in his case. “From the outset,” says O’Collins, “any analogy between his meeting and with the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus and the experience of Rees’s widows and widowers seems to be ruled

⁴⁸² Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted*, 178.

⁴⁸³ Gerald O’Collins and Daniel Kendall, “The Uniqueness of the Easter Appearances,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 54.2 (1992): 287-307; Gerald O’Collins, “The Risen Jesus: Presence and Analogies,” in Stanley E. Porter, Michael A Hayes, and David Tombs, *Resurrection* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 195-217; idem, “The Resurrection and Bereavement Experiences,” *Irish Theological Quarterly*, 76.3 (2011): 224-237.

⁴⁸⁴ O’Collins, “The Resurrection and Bereavement Experiences,” 229.

out.”⁴⁸⁵ Third, there are no indications that those who appeared to their living spouse remotely died in the same way as Jesus. Indeed, the best research indicates that they passed away from natural causes or accidents. There are no cases of suicides or homicides, let alone executions.

A fourth reason for differentiating the two visual experiences is that bereavement experiences do not happen to groups. But in the New Testament there are simultaneous group experiences of the risen Jesus (Matt. 28:9-10; Luke 24:13-35; John 21:1-14; 1 Cor. 15:6). A fifth reason is that these bereavement experiences can occur for many years after their spouses die. Aside from Paul, the resurrection appearances ceased shortly after Jesus was executed.

Another difference is that the vast majority of the bereaved do not tell anyone about these episodes. On the other hand, a unique mission inaugurating experience was perceived by the original percipients. Lastly, in the case of these bereavement episodes there is no life-long change. But the disciples set the world ablaze with their new convictions about Jesus’ rising from the dead.

What is more, belief in the *bodily resurrection* makes bereavement experiences highly untenable, especially in light of the Jewish matrix from which it came. As Wright suggested: “‘Meetings’ with Jesus, likewise, could by themselves have been interpreted in a variety of ways. Most people in the ancient world (though not so many, it seems, in the modern world) knew that visions and appearances of recently dead people occurred.”⁴⁸⁶ So it might be asked: why didn’t these experiences lead the apostles to say Jesus was in Abraham’s bosom? Or that he was in apocalyptic glory as some martyr-

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid., 229.

⁴⁸⁶ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 689.

prophet? These inferences would have made more sense than the bodily resurrection in light of the religious context of first century Palestine. As Kasper keenly asserted: “In neo-Judaism exaltation (or ecstasy) was the only category available to express the fact that a human being on earth would still play a part in the eschatological events. Exaltation was therefore a current category, which was used in an attempt to express a person’s eschatological importance.”⁴⁸⁷

The earliest believers could certainly discriminate between physical, post-mortem encounters with Jesus and other experiences of living in Christ.⁴⁸⁸ As Pannenberg rightly says: “one must at the same time take into consideration that primitive Christianity itself apparently knew how to distinguish between ecstatic visionary experiences and the fundamental encounters with the resurrected Lord.”⁴⁸⁹ Indeed, an alternative explanation of these so-called meetings would have confirmed that Jesus was truly dead, not gloriously risen from the dead, never to die again!⁴⁹⁰

Ehrman claims that it is not within the province of historians to discuss the probability of miracles. He writes: “I’m willing to grant that miracles—that is, events that we cannot explain within our concepts of how ‘nature’ normally works—can and do happen. There still remains, however, a huge, I’d even say, insurmountable problem when discussing Jesus’ miracles. Even if miracles are *possible*, there is no way for the

⁴⁸⁷ Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, 149.

⁴⁸⁸ O’Collins, *Jesus Risen*, 116-118, carefully delineates resurrection appearances from experiences of ‘ecstasy’ (e.g., Acts 10:9-16; 2 Cor. 12:2-4); “dreams” (e.g., Matt. 1:20, 2:12, 13, 19, 20, 22); how the mind grasps the truth about Jesus (cf. 2 Cor. 3:14); the experience of Jesus in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:9; 2 Cor. 3:17, 5:17); “revelations” (1 Cor. 12:1, 15:3-8; cf. 2 Cor. 12:7); experiencing Christ in Word and sacrament (Luke 24:30ff.); experiencing the risen Lord in the community (Matt. 18:20), or in his body, the church (1 Cor. 12:27); experiencing Christ in persons who suffer for righteousness (Matt. 25:31-46); understanding the notion that Jesus would one day ‘come in the clouds of glory’ (Mark 13:26, 14:62); experiences of the imaginative vision of Christ that Stephen and/or Paul had (Acts 7:55, 56; Acts 22:17-21).

⁴⁸⁹ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*, 94.

⁴⁹⁰ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 690, 691.

historian who sticks strictly to the canons of historical evidence to show that they have ever happened.”⁴⁹¹ Lest historians commit the “god-of-the-gaps fallacy,”⁴⁹² methodological constraints prevent the historian from responsibly inferring the resurrection hypothesis as a viable option. For miracles are a matter of faith, not proof.

Part of the problem for Ehrman is that he defines miracles as special divine acts outside the natural world. Miracles are, by definition, meta-historical.⁴⁹³ By contrast, special divine acts are more than historical, but they are definitely not less than historical. They take place *in* the spatio-temporal realm, thus leaving them open to historical investigation. But they are not *of* the historical process. Thus there is an empirical and superempirical aspect to them. The former is knowable in an objective way but the latter has subjective appeal. They are not merely internal experiences; though there is a subjective response to them. They remain objective in nature. For instance, Jesus could be seen (Matt. 28:7, 17; Mark 16:7, John 20:14, 18; 1 Cor. 9:1, 15:5-8), heard (Matt. 28:9, 10; John 20:15, 16), and touched (Matt. 28:9; Luke 24:39; John 20:17, 20, 27). He also ate food (Luke 24:41-43; cf. John 21:13).

Now, when it comes to determining the cause(s) of the evidence, historians normally appeal to law-like regularities, not miraculous ones. But, in a sense, all events are unique and without parallel. So if a naturalistic explanation does not seem to account for the facts because the evidence is pulling in a direction which strongly suggests that a miracle has happened, and if the context in which the event is thought to have occurred is

⁴⁹¹ Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 225, 226. Cf. 228, 229. See also *Jesus, Interrupted*, 175.

⁴⁹² The “god of the gaps” fallacy is committed when historians prematurely invoke the supernatural to explain uncertainties about the past.

⁴⁹³ Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 226. Curiously, Ehrman recognizes that Paul at least viewed the “appearances” as historical phenomena. See Ehrman, *Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene*, 135; idem, *Jesus, Interrupted*, 178.

religiously charged, then it would be feasible for the historian *who believes in a personal God* who would reveal himself in history to conclude that a miracle has happened.⁴⁹⁴

Notice the indispensability of scholastic apologetics at this point.

Troeltsch's "principle of analogy"⁴⁹⁵ is not a hard and fast rule. It can be qualified and subsequently recast in a way that is hospitable to the likelihood of miracles. Historicism is no longer a prevailing view in the academy in a postmodern age. As Avery Dulles wrote: "According to a positivist view that was widely accepted fifty or a hundred years ago, history is a science analogous to physics or chemistry. It proceeds on the assumption that the world is a closed system in which causes and effects are connected by strict necessity. History, in that view, leaves no place for the unique, the exceptional, and especially not for events brought about by God's direct activity."⁴⁹⁶ But such a view of history has been widely abandoned.⁴⁹⁷ As John Meier writes: "Whether we call it a bias, a *Tendenz*, a worldview, or a faith stance, everyone who writes on the historical Jesus writes from some ideological standpoint; no critic is exempt."⁴⁹⁸

Even if the historian is debarred from inferring a miracle as an explanation because of methodological restraints, this would not mean that intellectually curious individuals cannot take the reins from professional historians at this step in the argument and draw this conclusion as an explanation. It would certainly be a tragedy if scholars

⁴⁹⁴ For a good discussion, see John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, Vol. 2, *Mentor, Message and Miracles*, (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 512-515.

⁴⁹⁵ The "principle of analogy" is a general rule in historiography which says historians should draw inferences about the past that bear some similarity with observable events in the present.

⁴⁹⁶ Avery Dulles, "Historians and the Reality of Christ," *First Things* 28 (1992): 21.

⁴⁹⁷ Richard Evans, *In Defense of History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 217; C. Behan McCullagh, *The Truth of History* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 35.

⁴⁹⁸ John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, Vol. 1, *The Roots of the Problem and Person* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 5, 6. For additional support of Meier's uncontroversial claim, see the fine essay by Alan G. Padgett, "Advice for Religious Historians: On the Myth of a Purely Historical Jesus," in Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O'Collins, (eds), *The Resurrection: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Resurrection of Jesus* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1997), 287-307.

were prevented from drawing the correct explanation because of methodological restraints. The fact that we do not have absolute certainty when it comes to understanding each piece of evidence, or that the resurrection is a miraculous event does not mean that historians and other critics should refrain from using the evidence that is currently at their disposal. Background theories are inevitable and have an impact on the kind of conclusions that are made (one background theory is that God exists; thus the previous chapter in this dissertation). No one can do history from a strictly neutral standpoint. This is precisely why the classical approach to apologetics is needed.

Hence, skeptics usually acknowledge that there is evidence for the resurrection. But he easily hesitates to explain it because of ancillary reasons that are related to establishing what should count as evidence in the first place. Though Christian theologians might be passionate about the argument for the resurrection, this should not be confused with the attempt to demonstrate it. Rather, the most sophisticated critics generally speak in tentative terms about the nature of the evidence, affirming the resurrection hypothesis as the *best* explanation of the data, not the *only* explanation.

Ehrman claims that the appearances can be reinterpreted as bereavement experiences, but this possibility is ruled out for a variety of reasons. Historians are not forced to disprove all competing views before they award historicity to the most defensible one. If a single conclusion (the appearances) seems to stand out among all other alternatives, then historians should accept that view as the best explanation. Ehrman's only significant argument against the case for the resurrection—let alone taking it as the best explanation of the evidence —has to do with his endorsement of

methodological naturalism. But this restraint is outdated in a postmodern age, one in which historians take interdisciplinary work seriously.

All historians are inevitably influenced by the social sciences, philosophy, and even religious commitments. There is no such thing as the historical method apart from the influence of presuppositions. In conclusion, we are of the opinion that Ehrman's case against the resurrection is inadequate. The rationality of the resurrection should be upheld over its rival (rational) hypotheses.

Let us turn to what I believe is the most powerful alternative to the resurrection hypothesis, one that is put forth by Dale Allison.

Resurrection and the Paranormal

Undoubtedly parapsychology has become increasingly popular in recent times. Consequently, many scholars have employed the term "apparition" as a substitute for understanding the nature of the appearances.⁴⁹⁹ Geza Vermes, for instance, repeatedly described the appearances as "apparitions"⁵⁰⁰ in his book on the resurrection. Though John Dominic Crossan has apparently changed his position on the historical credibility of Christ's resurrection, he also characterized the appearances as "apparitions."⁵⁰¹

⁴⁹⁹ For some older works that make this connection, see James Hyslop, *Psychical Research and the Resurrection* (Boston: Small, Maynard, 1908); Michael C. Perry, *The Easter Enigma: An Essay on the Resurrection With Special Reference to the Data of Psychical Research* (New York: Faber and Faber, 1959); Renée Haynes, *The Hidden Springs: An Enquiry Into the Extra-Sensory Perception* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972), 147-151; C. Pearce Higgins, "Biblical Miracle II," in C. Pearce Higgins and G. Whitby, (eds.), *Life, Death and Psychical Research* (London: Rider, 1973), 147-156; Paul Badham, *Christian Beliefs About Life After Death* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), 18-64. Also see Hugh Montefiore, *The Miracles of Jesus* (London, SPCK, 2005), 105-114.

⁵⁰⁰ Geza Vermes, *The Resurrection of Jesus: History and Myth* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 17, 92, 102, 108, 120, 140, 148, 150.

⁵⁰¹ John Dominic Crossan, "The Resurrection: Historical Event or Theological Explanation?: A Dialogue," in Robert T. Stewart, (ed.), *The Resurrection of Jesus: John Dominic Crossan and N. T. Wright in Dialogue* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 33. "Then there's the terrible shock of the crucifixion. Now what has to happen next is that *plus* the risen apparitions. I am convinced as a fact that they had

Notwithstanding their uncritical references in their writings, Dale Allison has become the most salient representative of the apparitions hypothesis in recent years, flaunting the research in parapsychology with the purpose of defusing the argument in defense of Jesus' resurrection.

However, a balanced comparison of apparitions and the evidence for the appearances reveals that there are more differences than similarities. Because the earliest Christians considered the appearances as unique irruptions of the divine in human history, apparitional experiences cannot be extrapolated as the exclusive basis for understanding the appearances. Let us first turn to the field of apparitions research.

Sometimes the field of parapsychology is considered a "pseudo-science," but this prejudice seems to be receding in certain quarters of the scientific community. As Harvey Irwin and Caroline Watt have explained: "Historically speaking there has been a clear progression in parapsychology from the collection of anecdotal material to the experimental investigation of laboratory analogues of psi phenomena. Thus a major element in parapsychologists' efforts to put their discipline on a scientific footing is the recourse to scientific method."⁵⁰²

Most apparitional experiences are documented in anecdotal reports. Unlike experimental evidence, which is controlled under laboratory conditions, anecdotal

apparitions. How you explain that is a separate issue; but it happened; they are not making it up; it's not hallucinations. My statement is that the stories in the Gospels, as I've argued, are primarily interested in who's in charge and had an apparition. But that presumes, even as I claim, as I would, that Mark's tomb story is made up. I think I'm with you, apparitions happened. But I think, apparitions plus the experience of 'kingdom is already here'; that's my explanation of those two things. With regard to the empty tomb, honestly, I would say, plus or minus, it's not worth it. I don't mind. Historically, I'm not sure because I think Mark created it, but it's not something I would argue. I concede it." Crossan confirms this idea toward the end of the book (176): "I do not for here and now debate either the historicity of either Jesus' burial or the empty tomb's discovery. Instead, for here and now (*dato non concessio*, to be sure) *I take the Gospel stories of the empty tomb's discovery and of all those risen apparitions as historically factual in their entirety.*"

⁵⁰² Harvey J. Irwin and Caroline A. Watt, *An Introduction to Parapsychology*, 5th ed., (Jefferson: McFarland, 2007), 247.

evidence is provided by eyewitnesses who pass on the information related to their experience. Whether the experience can be explained by paranormal processes is hotly debated in contemporary parapsychology. Sometimes these experiences are best explained by naturalistic processes such as hallucinations.

Now, apparitions should be distinguished from mirages, illusions and, more problematically, hallucinations (which usually stem from drug use and/or mental illness). One of the criteria used to delineate apparitions from hallucinations or illusions is that new information is gleaned from a veridical apparitional experience (perhaps the percipient learns something from the encounter that could not have been ordinarily known). A second criteria is that apparitions are sometimes seen by many people at once, whereas hallucinations cannot be collectively shared.

Apparitional research has resulted in what might be called a taxonomy of apparitional experiences.⁵⁰³ The first type is usually called an experimental apparitional experience. In these cases the living can somehow make themselves seen to someone else in another location. Though very few examples are outlined and discussed in the literature, these occurrences almost always happen to experiencers who are asleep or in a trance-like state. Experimental apparitions have led some parapsychologists to maintain

⁵⁰³ Henry Sidgwick, et. al. "Report on the Census of Hallucinations," *Proceedings for the Society of Psychical Research*, 10 (1894), 25-422; George N.M. Tyrrell, *Apparitions*, (New York: Collier, 1963), 35-36; Charles Green and Celia McCreery, *Apparitions* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1975); E. Haraldsson et al., "National Survey of Psychical Experiences and Attitudes Towards the Paranormal in Iceland, in J.D. Morris et al., (eds.), *Research in Parapsychology*, (Metuchen: Scarecrow, 1977); J. Palmer, "A Community Mail Survey of Psychic Experiences," *Journal of American Society of Psychical Research*, 69, (1979): 226-339.

that at least some apparitions are not merely subjective.⁵⁰⁴ However, almost two-thirds of all apparitions reported are of the dead, not the living.⁵⁰⁵

A second type is commonly known as the crisis apparition. These meetings occur when the person represented by the apparition is in some sort of crisis (such as an accident or is near death). As a general rule of thumb, parapsychologists hold that these experiences occur within twelve hours before or after the crisis begins. These apparitions are very short lived, meaning they do not reoccur over an extended period of time. In many cases the percipient does not expect or think about the person represented by the phantasm.

The third type is known as the postmortem apparitional experience. Almost all of these represent someone who has been dead for at least twelve hours. Based on the famous Chaffin case (1927), the persons involved with these apparitions have been known to exchange unknown information to the experient(s). Thus Irwin and Watt: “Note also in this case the apparition had both a visual and an auditory component. As with the other types of apparition, the figure is lifelike and appears suddenly and unexpectedly.”⁵⁰⁶ Sometimes these experiences appear in a dream; but in other cases the apparition appears in ordinary circumstances. They are sometimes seen by a group of people, although all experients may not see the phantasm. Most apparitions are experienced visually, in about four-fifths of the reported cases.⁵⁰⁷

⁵⁰⁴ Cf. D. Rugo, “Apparitions, Hauntings, and Poltergeists,” in Edgar D. Mitchell and John White, (eds.) *Psychic Exploration: A Challenge for Science* (New York: Putnam’s, 1974), 376-377; Tyrrell, *Apparitions*, 142-148.

⁵⁰⁵ Palmer, “A Community Mail Survey of Psychic Experiences,” 228.

⁵⁰⁶ Irwin and Watt, *An Introduction to Parapsychology*, 197.

⁵⁰⁷ Green and McCreery, *Apparitions*, 143.

The fourth category is known as the common ghost experience (otherwise known as a “haunt”). In these cases a figure appears in the same locality over an extended period of time. Given this description of hauntings, usually many different people have the chance to see them. Ghosts do not show much awareness of the living. These characteristics seem to evade the common depiction of ghosts in folklore. “Additionally, ghosts seem more somnambulistic in their movements. Some ghosts reportedly perform the same actions in the same location on each occasion they are experienced.”⁵⁰⁸ They perform the same “behavior” whether they are seen or not.

Now if we are going to use apparitions to explain the appearances, then we should focus on the *postmortem apparitional experience*. Like many of the reports describing the postmortem apparition, the resurrection appearances happened over a period of time, not within twelve hours after Jesus’ death. Thus, the other types of apparitional experience do not resonate with the New Testament witnesses. As Andrew MacKenzie and Jane Henry rightly observe: “*The hardest apparitions to explain by normal means are crisis apparitions where information about the death of a person appears to have been transmitted correctly by the apparition, and collective cases where more than one person sees the same apparition*” (emphasis mine).⁵⁰⁹

So if a skeptic is going to focus on apparitions as a substitute for explaining the appearances, then the responsible thing to do is cite the relevant case studies from postmortem apparitions, not haphazardly cite studies from the other three types. Nor does it seem responsible for critics to patch together unrelated cases of apparitional experiences to explain the nature of the appearances (simply because the other three types

⁵⁰⁸ Irwin and Watt, *An Introduction to Parapsychology*, 197.

⁵⁰⁹ Andrew MacKenzie and Jane Henry, *Parapsychology: Research and Exceptional Experiences* (New York: Routledge: 2004), 182.

do not resemble what has been concluded by the New Testament). Because the current state of apparitions research is highly indecisive and uncertain in this regard, it is exceedingly difficult to extrapolate individual cases of postmortem apparitional experiences as the univocal basis for understanding the appearances.

Though many apparitions can be explained by the paranormal, other parapsychologists are not as easily convinced. This observation seems to make matters even more complicated for scholars wanting to emphasize similarities between apparitions and the appearances. There is no general consensus in the scientific community of parapsychologists heading in either direction about this problem.⁵¹⁰ As MacKenzie and Henry observe: “Apparitions can be thought of as nothing more than hallucinations and the bulk of cases probably are just that.”⁵¹¹ For every apparitional case study that runs parallel to the appearances, another case study can be cited against it. There is simply no end to this point-counterpoint contest.

Consider the following case: “The apparition itself may appear solid and lifelike or semitransparent. It may be seen and heard by all present; or some people may not see it, even when their attention is drawn to the position where it is. It may appear and disappear in locked rooms.”⁵¹² Quite naturally, this report runs parallel to the appearances. Further, we also have *reports* where the phantasm ate food and was touched.⁵¹³ Perhaps, then, Jesus ate the fish! But, as Green and McCreery point out, the referent person usually appears within three meters of the experient(s) and is *not*

⁵¹⁰ James Houran and Rense Lange, *Hauntings and Poltergeists: Multidisciplinary Perspectives* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2001), 4. See also Irwin and Watt, *Introduction to Parapsychology*, 201.

⁵¹¹ See also MacKenzie and Henry, *Parapsychology*, 183.

⁵¹² Brian C. Nisbet, “Apparitions,” in I.G. Guinness, (ed.), *Psychical Research: A Guide to its History, Principles and Practices: In Celebration of 100 Years of the Society for Psychical Research* (Wellingborough: Aquarian, 1982), 92.

⁵¹³ Green and McCreery, *Apparitions*, 102-113; Tyrrell, *Apparitions*, 63ff.

previously known by them.⁵¹⁴ Obviously this report paints a picture that runs contrary to the appearance to the *disciples*—and to those who knew *of* Jesus (such as the apostle Paul).

Other examples could easily be cited. Postmortem apparitional experiences almost always happen indoors. By contrast, the New Testament writers suggest that Jesus appeared outside and inside. Or again, parapsychologist Alan Gauld says that apparitions (of the four types, we are not told) cannot be used as evidence for life after death.⁵¹⁵ Irwin and Watt seem to agree: “The spirit hypothesis of apparitional experiences now is promoted by a minority of modern parapsychologists.”⁵¹⁶ Still others maintain that apparitions provide evidence for the afterlife.⁵¹⁷ Of course, Catholic theologians have always held that Jesus’ resurrection serves as the exemplar and forerunner of our own resurrections from the dead at the eschaton. Belief in Jesus’ resurrection provides believers with necessary ingredient for upholding the eschatological resurrection.

Or again, one of the basic features of the appearances is that they were mission-inaugurating (cf. Matt. 28:18-20). But, in the majority of apparitional reports (again, which of the four types we are not told!), there seems to be no life-changing mission that accompanies the experience. As Brian Nisbet has mused: “The genuine apparition . . . is more likely to appear as a normally clothed figure, which is seen for a few brief moments

⁵¹⁴ Green and McCreery, *Apparitions*, 123.

⁵¹⁵ See Gauld’s chapter in MacKenzie and Henry, *Parapsychology*, 215-223.

⁵¹⁶ Irwin and Watt, *An Introduction to Parapsychology*, 202.

⁵¹⁷ H. Hart, “Six Theories About Apparitions,” *Proceedings for the Society for Psychical Research*, 50 (1956): 153-239; idem, “Scientific Survival Research,” *International Journal of Parapsychology*, 9 (1967): 43-52. Also see Nisbet, “Apparitions,” 99.

and then vanishes or gradually fades away. Sometimes a reason for its appearance can be suggested; but more often there is none.”⁵¹⁸

It should be kept in mind that *most* apparitional experiences do *not* resemble the appearances. Only certain cases will characterize certain features that run parallel to the appearances. Apparitions are not usually seen by groups (2-12 percent), let alone 500 at one time.⁵¹⁹ They are not usually seen by enemies (less than 1 percent of the deceased appear to one of their former enemies).⁵²⁰ The vast majority of them are unable to be touched (only 2.7 percent can be touched). And less than 1 percent of the cases lead the experient(s) to believe that the referent person had been raised bodily from the dead. Yet all of these characteristics are featured at the origins of Easter faith.

So, it would be an exceptionally rare case that an apparition would be characterized by all of these features in a series of different episodes over a period of weeks (or much later on, as in the case of Paul). When each improbability is multiplied by other improbabilities, we arrive at an staggeringly incomprehensible chance:

1:3,800,000.⁵²¹ In effect the chance that any one apparition would be described by all four of these characteristics makes the possibility of a constructive comparison between apparitions and the appearances exceptionally implausible. Even worse for the chances of comparison, it is highly uncertain how any of these cases could be neatly categorized into any of the four apparition types (i.e., crisis, experimental, postmortem, or haunts).

While most parapsychologists confidently hold to the reality of parapsychological experiences, they are highly divided as to whether paranormal factors account for them.

⁵¹⁸ Nisbet, “Apparitions,” 91.

⁵¹⁹ Green and McCreery, 41.

⁵²⁰ Dale C. Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus*, 267, n283, 284.

⁵²¹ $0.12 \times 0.009 \times 0.27 \times 0.009 = 0.0000002644$.

Added to this problem is the lack of understanding individual apparition cases and how the statistics pertaining to each of them might compare to the conclusions established about the appearances. For every apparitional experience that is similar to the appearances, another case can be cited to highlight the dissimilarities between them. Although it is not *logically* impossible to patch together unrelated apparitional experiences as a control belief to retranslate the original meanings assigned to the appearances, an agnostic position seem to be more justified. We do not have enough positive evidence for apparitions to make a constructive comparison between them and the appearances.

Now, one New Testament historian who is sympathetic to using the research on apparitions to understand the resurrection appearances is Dale Allison. Gerald O'Collins has responded to Allison's allusions to bereavement experiences (as mentioned earlier on), but no scholar has interacted with his references to apparitions and how they might be linked to the appearances and the much greater project of arguing for Jesus' resurrection.⁵²² Because some apparitions resonate with the appearances, Allison claims, Christian apologists cannot responsibly deduce the resurrection hypothesis as the best explanation of the agreed-upon evidence.

For Allison, the apologist's inference would only make sense given the traditional meaning of the appearances. Let us discuss Allison's positions and how they might affect the inference to the resurrection over its competing casual explanations. Allison grants that the disciples saw Jesus in a series of appearances in different times and places: "These appear to be the facts, and they raise the question of how we should explain

⁵²² Gerald O'Collins, *Believing in the Resurrection: The Meaning and Promise of the Resurrection* (Mahwah: Paulist, 2011), 12-16, 175-191.

them.”⁵²³ The emphasis is not exclusively placed on the disciples’ experience. *Jesus also saw them.*⁵²⁴ After experiencing the risen Lord (1 Cor. 15:8), Paul believed in a one-to-one correspondence between the earthly body and the transformed, resurrected body that is to come: “there is no good evidence for belief in a non-physical resurrection in Paul, much less within the primitive Jerusalem community. . . . Even Paul, in 1 Cor. 15, when defending the notion of a ‘spiritual body,’ teaches—like 2 *Bar.* 51:10—the transformation of corpses, not their abandonment.”⁵²⁵ The earliest percipients were convinced that Jesus had been raised bodily, not just spiritually, or immaterially.⁵²⁶ Thus the appearances are to be distinguished from later visual phenomena in the early Christian communities.⁵²⁷

Believing in the resurrection did not mean that the recently deceased was naturally present to the living, but it included one’s physical body coming back to life, never to die again. In Wright’s memorable words, the Jewish doctrine of the resurrection meant “life-after-life-after-death.” Commenting on the possibility of understanding the resurrection as the natural presence of the deceased, Allison wrote: “I know of no evidence for this point of view.”⁵²⁸ He also speaks of the widespread belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus.⁵²⁹

Anecdotal evidence for apparitions indicates cases where the referent person was seen and heard; seen by many individuals at a time; seen by some but not all; offered reassurance to the living; seen as real and/or solid; and seen less and less as time goes

⁵²³ Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus*, 269; cf. 346.

⁵²⁴ Dale C. Allison, “The Resurrection of Jesus and Rational Apologetics,” *Philosophia Christi*, 10.2 (2008): 315; idem, *Resurrecting Jesus*, 346.

⁵²⁵ Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus*, 317.

⁵²⁶ *Ibid.*, 314, 317, 325n497.

⁵²⁷ *Ibid.*, 260.

⁵²⁸ *Ibid.*, 325n497.

⁵²⁹ *Ibid.*, 230.

on.⁵³⁰ Notwithstanding these parallels to the appearances, Allison himself recognizes that these *cannot* be used to retranslate the original meaning of the appearances: “I eschew explaining the appearances of Jesus in terms of typical appearances from the dead—an unfeasible task anyway given our limited knowledge and understanding of apparitions in general—but simply ask what light a wider human phenomenon might shed on some of the issues surrounding the resurrection stories.”⁵³¹

Indeed, he goes on to say apparitional experiences “cannot explain the specific content of the words attributed to the risen Jesus.” And of the reported cases, none of them led “to the founding of a new religion.”⁵³² Because Jesus was a messianic figure, the appearances took on a different kind of significance to the original percipients, leading the first disciples to worship the Christ.⁵³³ Context begets meaning. An empty tomb, to be sure, does not usually accompany an apparition either! Allison does claim that apparitional experiences can be used as a heuristic tool for understanding what happened to Paul and the other percipients.⁵³⁴

Now, with these apparitional reports in hand, a skeptic might challenge (and, then, presumably overturn) the apologist’s inference to the resurrection hypothesis. According to Allison:

A skeptic, however, would, with some justification readily respond that these defects of apparition reports apply equally to the New Testament accounts. For example, can anyone really come up with proof or even strong evidence that the stories in Luke and John in which the risen Jesus eats and invites himself to be touched (Luke 24: 36-43; John 20:24-29) comes ultimately from eyewitnesses? I freely grant that one cannot show that they do not; but this is scarcely the same as showing that they do. So are not these important gospel paragraphs, from an evidential point of view, ‘lacking’ something? In

⁵³⁰ Ibid., 279-282.

⁵³¹ Ibid., 285.

⁵³² Ibid., 283. Cf. 284.

⁵³³ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel*, 232; James Dunn, *The First Christians Worship Jesus?*, 24; Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 64, 65; idem, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God?*, 151, 192-194, 199.

⁵³⁴ Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus*, 285.

other words, just like so many apparitional accounts, they are ‘questionable,’ because their origin cannot be established. Many scholars have no problem classifying Luke 24:36-43 and John 20:24-29 as later apologetic. Is this not a possibility?⁵³⁵

A disputable issue arises when Allison limits himself to possibilities instead of taking the initiative to present a defensible position that can account for the New Testament evidence. In effect Allison has explained everything and so has explained nothing: “one can draw any number of curves through a finite set of points to create a thousand different pictures.”⁵³⁶ The issue is not whether historians *can* construct viable hypotheses that *can* compete with the resurrection hypothesis, but whether other hypotheses can outstrip the latter through their use of defensible arguments.

Allison retorts: even if the resurrection happened, this does not mean that we can *show* that it happened; and if the resurrection did *not* happen, this would not mean that we can *show* that it did *not* happen.⁵³⁷ But no reputable apologist would seek to demonstrate the resurrection. Rather, apologists usually argue that the resurrection hypothesis is the *best* explanation of the data.⁵³⁸ Representative of this modest epistemological inference is William Lane Craig:

I do not assert that belief in the resurrection of Jesus ‘is the only reasonable option, and thus it would be irrational not to believe in it.’ Rather, I argue that four established facts . . . ‘provide adequate inductive grounds for inferring Jesus’ resurrection,’ and that ‘it’s very difficult to deny that the resurrection of Jesus is the best explanation.’ of these four facts. . . . These statements are carefully chosen and indicate that I am employing inductive reasoning understood according to the model of inference to the best explanation. This model holds that there may be a number of reasonable explanations for a body of evidence, and that one is to choose from this pool of live options that explanation which is the best, that is, which most successfully meets such criteria as having explanatory power, explanatory scope, and not being ad hoc. . . . Again, I did not say that it is irrational to fail to believe in the resurrection.⁵³⁹

⁵³⁵ Allison, “The Resurrection of Jesus and Rational Apologetics,” 329.

⁵³⁶ Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus*, 339.

⁵³⁷ *Ibid.*, 338.

⁵³⁸ See footnote 446.

⁵³⁹ William Lane Craig, “Resurrection and the Real Jesus,” in Paul Copan (ed.), *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?: A Debate Between William Lane Craig and John Dominic Crossan* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 160.

So, the more appropriate alternative is to develop a defensible argument that might persuade others when looking at the available evidence. Allison reflects on what might count as evidence for the resurrection hypothesis, and he concludes that some facts are in fact relevant. Why then does he refuse to propose an hypothesis that can account for these facts? In other terms, Allison deduces what he thinks should count as evidence (by garnering the relevant evidence to establish the appearances and the empty tomb), but he balks at the opportunity to explain it. Instead he flaunts the mere possibility that the appearances might have been apparitions in order to defuse the apologetic claim.

A paucity of evidence should drive historians down the path of epistemological humility about retrieving the shape of the past. But in some cases humility can be employed immoderately, fortifying an agnostic outlook that militates against the evidence in favor of one position over the others. Such a problem is paramount in Allison's work. Even if we have "meager evidence" for a purported event, this would not mean that historians should not attempt to explain the evidence at their disposal. Sometimes a lot of evidence can sometimes make it more difficult to explain what happened. Thus historians are not forced to disprove all competing hypotheses before they award historicity to the most defensible explanation. If a single hypothesis seems to stand out among the alternatives, then historians should accept that hypothesis as the best explanation.

Allison agrees with the biblical evidence in support of the existence, distribution and nature of the appearances. Correspondingly, he should not easily concede to other *possibilities*. For every apparitional experience that is similar to the appearances, another

case can be cited to highlight the dissimilarities between them. Thus agnosticism is the proper stance to take with respect to apparitions research.

Positively speaking, the apologist has something meaningful to say about the appearances. She assesses the New Testament writings not as the Word of God but as a collection of reliable Greek documents coming down to us from the first century. Allison himself agrees with the conclusions tentatively established by the critical historian.

Negatively speaking, there is *not* enough *positive* evidence to establish anything significant about apparitions to make a constructive comparison between them and the appearances. Again, Allison agrees with the latter point.

Furthermore, Allison is well aware that the appearance narratives are not historical in every detail. And he knows that this circumstantial problem should not preclude one from affirming the historicity of the appearances. Critical realism allows the historian to arrive at this conclusion. Parapsychologists are equally critical when analyzing the extraordinary experiences of many individuals but have not arrived at an equally warranted positive conclusion. Rather, the established facts within the field of apparitions research are practically nil. So it is disanalogous for Allison to compare the “skepticism” of the New Testament scholar and the “skepticism” that apologists might have about apparitional experiences. Practitioners within each of these fields arrive at two different conclusions with different degrees of certainty (or, uncertainty). Allison concedes with the conclusions set by both camps.

By appealing to the pre-Easter predictions of Jesus, Allison’s next argument is that a skeptic could responsibly hold that the appearances were in reality apparitions but

later retranslated into the language of the bodily resurrection. Jesus' predictions about himself are

the sort of thing a skeptic would wholeheartedly welcome. Would not the evidence for the resurrection be stronger if we could believe that Jesus did not forecast his resurrection, so that the appearances were utterly surprising, totally unprepared for, and so out of the blue? . . . I am unsure of the apologetical payoff. Keeping in mind that religious movements tend to interpret events in terms of already established categories and expectations, . . . could one not argue that the disciples, upon having apparitional encounters with Jesus, interpreted them in terms of resurrection because resurrection was the category that Jesus had antecedently given them?⁵⁴⁰

Notice that Allison once again refers to logical *possibility* of apparitions to explain the appearances. This historiographical problem has already been addressed. Secondly, it should be remembered that Allison himself affirms the reality of the appearances. And he disputes the positive meaning that may be established (albeit tentatively) in the field of apparitions research. Thus Allison might wish to play the role of the apologist when facing the skeptical challenge that gives him anxiety about this problem.

If Jesus predicted his resurrection, then this would have added weight to the religiously charged context that is not only needed to advance the argument for Jesus' resurrection, but would have been useful for understanding the nature of the appearances. Nonetheless, Paul was unaware of these pre-Easter predictions. Presumably, at least some of the 500 (1 Cor. 15:6) were unaware of them as well.

Allison responds that a skeptic's world-view might allow her to make the apparitions inference. Perhaps she has had a firsthand experience of an apparition and, consequently, strongly suspects that if the original percipients had the same experience(s), then this would have driven them to affirm with unwavering constancy that Jesus had been raised bodily:

⁵⁴⁰ Allison, "The Resurrection of Jesus and Rational Apologetics," 331. Cf. *Resurrecting Jesus*, 347.

While there is not a sliver of evidence for such a fantastic state of affairs, it cannot be dismissed as inconceivable, only wholly unlikely for utter lack of evidence. . . . The hypothetical scenario goes to show that proof of the Christian confession can never be achieved because possible alternatives can always be imagined. It also raises the question how Christians have come to the view that invoking space aliens beggars belief whereas crediting God with a resurrection is sensible. Science fiction . . . has certainly not hesitated to give aliens the power to raise human beings from the dead, so at least we find the notion intelligible.⁵⁴¹

Allison repeatedly conflates the historians' use of the best explanation and the notion of proof. He needs to recognize that apologists usually cast their argument through the use of the former, not the latter. Nevertheless, *Allison needs to assess the arguments of natural theology with the evidence for aliens in order for the analogy in support of the apparition hypothesis to work.*

One of the deepest and most perennial questions that people ask pertains to life after death.⁵⁴² These common questions stem from our natural inclinations. It makes sense that God will concern himself with personal creatures to give them some answers to help resolve the problem of death. If we take the questions about human destiny seriously, then people must search for clues in history to get some answers about what lies beyond the grave. In the words of Walter Kasper:

The question of man's purpose in life cannot be answered from within his own history but only eschatologically. Implicitly, therefore, in all the fundamental processes of his life, man is driven by the problem of life and its ultimate purpose. The answer will not be found until the end of history. For the moment all man can do is to listen to and look at history and try to find signs in which that end is portrayed or even anticipated. Those signs will always be ambiguous within history; they will only become clear in the light of faith's perceptions of that end of history, just as conversely that perception must constantly make sure of its own validity in the light of history. Only if the problem is seen in this comprehensive perspective can the testimonies of the early Church and of the later church tradition be understood meaningfully.⁵⁴³

In Christianity, life does not end at the grave, but continues on in a bodily life that is glorious, incorruptible, and eternal.

⁵⁴¹ Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus*, 340.

⁵⁴² Cf. *Nostra Aetate*, N. 1.

⁵⁴³ Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, trans. V. Green (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1976), 136.

Allison seems to support the conciliar teaching about God's existence and the importance of ramified natural theology: "In like fashion, I understand why Richard Swinburne, in his recent defense of the resurrection, commences by first seeking to establish the existence of a certain sort of God and the likelihood of this God communicating with and redeeming the human race."⁵⁴⁴ So, after showing some openness to Swinburne's ramified natural theology, he refuses to consider it as an underlying philosophical presupposition and settles for agnosticism about this natural theology instead.⁵⁴⁵ He is inclined to accept a bare deism: "I am reluctantly a cryptic Deist. My tendency is to live my life as though God made the world and then went away. It is hard for me to see the hand of providence either in history or in individual lives, including my own."⁵⁴⁶ At times Allison brushes aside philosophy when it comes to "doing history." But philosophy, including the arguments of ramified natural theology, deserve to influence historical thinking and argument, especially in a postmodern age which stresses academic collaboration and interdisciplinarity (thus chapter one of the dissertation). If historians follow philosophers in acknowledging good reasons to think that God might reveal himself to us in a particular way, then that could rightly predispose them to see God at work in the person of Jesus.⁵⁴⁷

So Allison's reference to aliens as another historical possibility *is disanalogous to support for his case from apparitions as an undercutting defeater of the historical argument for the resurrection*. Unless he can refute Aquinas' proofs for the existence of God and then provide convincing evidence for the existence of aliens and explain why

⁵⁴⁴ Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus*, 341.

⁵⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 351.

⁵⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 215.

⁵⁴⁷ Cf. O'Collins, *Believing in the Resurrection*, 16.

they would have a likely interest to raise Jesus, the apologist seems to be amply justified in holding to the resurrection hypothesis over its competing causal theories. It is possible that a theistic God will make a personal entry into human history in order to provide human beings with answers to their deepest questions about their final destiny.⁵⁴⁸

Conclusion

In this chapter of the dissertation I have tried to highlight an evidential apologetic approach to defending Christianity (for the evidential approach is one of a few models broadly discussed in the conciliar documents). Because the Council Fathers reemphasized the historical value of the New Testament writings for the purposes of showing the credibility of Christianity, I have focused on the historical evidence for Christ's resurrection. This concern resonates with the philosophical arguments surrounding the natural knowledge of God in the chapter on scholastic apologetics. For unless God exists, then there is no need to argue for the probability of a special divine act that will ignite the Christian movement.

The broad consensus of scholarship in the postconciliar period indicates that there are some generally established facts that critics must take into consideration when weighing the resurrection hypothesis in comparison to other naturalistic explanations. I have outlined the relevant facts (the burial, empty tomb, the appearances, and the origins of Christian worship), and combed through the relevant literature in resurrection studies

⁵⁴⁸ Cf. Richard Swinburne, *The Resurrection of God Incarnate*, (Oxford: Oxford University, 2003), 62: "No other of the major (or medium sized) religions is founded on a purported miracle for which there is even a moderate amount of historical evidence." The atheist turned theist, Antony Flew, *There is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2007), 157, 187, agrees: "As I have said more than once, no other religion enjoys anything like the combination of a charismatic figure like Jesus and a first class intellectual like St. Paul. If you're wanting omnipotence to set up a religion, it seems to me that this is the one to beat! . . . Today, I would say the claim concerning the resurrection is more impressive than any by the religious competition."

scholarship to pinpoint the major arguments that scholars have used to construct their case. I am of the view that naturalistic explanations of the data do not make as much sense as positing the bodily resurrection of Jesus as an event that occurs in history, a special divine act of God that answers questions about human destiny. The most salient rebuttal to the resurrection comes from Dale Allison and his apparitions hypothesis. I also explained why I think his explanation is shortsighted, if not mistaken.

A TEST CASE IN EXPERIENTIAL APOLOGETICS

From the time of the reformation until Vatican II, Catholic apologists sought to demonstrate the truth of the existential truth of the Catholic Church by showing how it alone epitomizes the four notes (i.e., oneness, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity). As a result of the Council, theologians now argue that the marks can be found in equal if not greater measure—qualitatively speaking—in other churches and ecclesial communities. Gone is the pre-conciliar approach which says that the Catholic Church is the one true church.⁵⁴⁹ This theological shift resulted in a decreased concern for apologetics.

Yet this decline does not mean the discipline of apologetics should be abandoned. The ecumenical movement continues to grow out of the conviction that when Christians are truly one, holy, catholic, and apostolic, the Gospel increases in credibility.⁵⁵⁰ Apologetics needs to be modified in light of the Catholic Church's participation in the ecumenical movement, taking on a more holistic approach than before. When Christians recite in the creed that the church embodies the marks, they are still affirming the fundamental features by which the true church is recognized.

Although the Council says that ecclesial elements, sanctification, and gifts of the Holy Spirit can be found outside the influence of Catholicism, this does not nullify her claim that she is the *truest* expression of the church.⁵⁵¹ Hence, although other Christian

⁵⁴⁹ For an article length discussion of the pre-conciliar use of the marks for apologetic purposes, see Joseph Fenton, "The True Church and the Notes of the Church," *The American Ecclesiastical Review*, 114, (1943): 282-297.

⁵⁵⁰ Michael Kinnamon, *The Vision of the Ecumenical Movement and How it Has Been Impoverished by its Friends* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2003), 150.

⁵⁵¹ *Dignitatis Humanae*, 1; *Lumen Gentium*, 8; *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 8.

groups might be true churches, they are not the truest Church. Ecclesiastical relativism is *not* constitutive of conciliar teaching.

This chapter is formed under the theological vision of Vatican II in order to (1) heighten an appreciation of post-conciliar apologetics by (2) utilizing the marks of the church to (3) lend credibility to the Gospel. Prior to the Council, theologians sought to establish the Catholic Church's distinctive doctrinal and moral claims over Protestant and Orthodox Christianities on the basis of the marks. A post-conciliar apologist would certainly be within his or her epistemic rights to show the superior expression of the marks within Catholicism,⁵⁵² but that is not the intention of this essay. My aim is to reach outsiders and even hesitant believers within the church community. Here the marks are utilized to lend credibility to the *Divine Founder*, not to provide support for any denomination over and against another.

Catholic Apologetics and the Ecclesial Attributes

In contrast to Pius XII's papal encyclical *Mystici Corporis*, which identified the Church of Christ directly with the Catholic Church, the Fathers of Vatican II inaugurated a remarkable shift by more broadly identifying the nature of the church. In *Lumen Gentium*, for instance, the bishops declared that the church subsists *in* (and not simply *is*) the Catholic Church.⁵⁵³ Given this more expansive view of the ecclesiastical landscape, the bishops envision the church as a complex reality, not a "perfect society" (as expressed

⁵⁵² Examples of the post-conciliar apologetic use of the marks (the *via notarum*) can be found in Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Seabury, 1978), 346-369; René Latourelle, *Christ and the Church: Signs of Salvation*, trans. Sr. Dominic Parker (New York: Alba House, 1972), 133-163, 211-264; Benedict M. Ashley, *Choosing a World-View and Value-System: An Ecumenical Apologetics* (New York: Alba House, 2000), 211-268.

⁵⁵³ *Lumen Gentium*, 8.

in the manuals of pre-conciliar apologetics) or a single community holding to the four properties exclusively.⁵⁵⁴ Correspondingly, the church is recognized as an invisible and visible reality, a mystical and hierarchical society, unable to be fully grasped.⁵⁵⁵

Because the Catholic Church subsists in the Church of Christ, Catholics can no longer hold to the older style of Catholic defense. Grace is not a quantitative thing, limited to Catholics alone. Rather, it is qualitative, dynamically and efficaciously working in the entire Church of Christ. Grace is the very life of God working in creation and in human life. Avery Dulles rightly observed: “Vatican II attributes the four properties to the church of Christ, not directly to the Roman Catholic Church.”⁵⁵⁶ As a result of the conciliar teaching, many Catholic theologians think differently about the marks today.⁵⁵⁷ Other churches are also said to be one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.

Extended further, holiness can also be found outside the boundaries of institutional Christianity. The church rejects nothing that is true and holy in non-Christian religions.⁵⁵⁸

One consequence of this remarkable shift is that other believers who take advantage of the gifts and callings they received can become more one, holy, catholic, and apostolic than Catholics: *all* churches can in fact attain an equal if not higher degree

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid., 8.

⁵⁵⁵ Ibid., 8.

⁵⁵⁶ Avery Dulles, “The Church as “One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic””, *Evangelical Review of Theology*, 23.1, (1999): 16.

⁵⁵⁷ Hans Küng, *The Church* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967), 263-359; Johannes Witte, “One Holy, Catholic and Apostolic,” in Herbert Vorgrimler, ed., *One, Holy Catholic and Apostolic*, trans. Edward Quinn and Alain Woodrow (London and Sydney: Sheed and Ward, 1968), 3-43; Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, trans. David Smith (New York: Seabury, 1983), II: 5-61; Avery Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986); Leonardo Boff, *Church, Charism, and Power* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 108-124; Francis A. Sullivan, *The Church We Believe In: One Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic* (New York: Paulist, 1988); Robert J. Schreiter, *The New Catholicity* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997), 116-131; Thomas P. Rausch, *Towards a Truly Catholic Church* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2005), 131-151; Richard Gaillardetz, *Ecclesiology for a Global Church* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2008), 35-131, 173-248.

⁵⁵⁸ *Nostra Aetate*, 2.

of sanctity than Catholics alone. As Dulles concludes: “Unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity are dynamic realities that depend on . . . the Holy Spirit. Evangelical communities that excel in love for Jesus Christ and in obedience to the Holy Spirit may be more unitive, holy, catholic and apostolic than highly sacramental and hierarchically organized churches in which faith and charity have become cold.”⁵⁵⁹

Thus the Council makes it difficult for apologists to demonstrate that Catholic Christianity better embodies the ecclesial attributes than other religious communities. The church of Christ is a mystery. And grace is not quantitative. As a human institution, the Catholic Church may fail to live up to her divine calling. However, all other things being equal, ecclesial vitality and institutional integrity can be found in greater measure in the Catholic Church than in other churches.⁵⁶⁰ According to Francis Sullivan: “What the Catholic apologist now has to justify is the claim of his church to have a certain fullness of what it means to be a church, and a fullness of the essential properties, such that it can rightly be said that the church of Christ subsists there in a way that is *not found in other churches*” (emphasis mine).⁵⁶¹

Although the ambitious argument of showing the superior quality of the marks within Catholicism is occasionally pursued by apologists in the post-conciliar era, my goal in this essay is to provide a defense of Christian faith in response to the secularist allegation which says Christian faith does more harm than good in the world.⁵⁶² In the pre-conciliar period, this argument was known as the *via empirica*. My argument is more

⁵⁵⁹ Dulles, “The Church as ‘One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic,’” 27.

⁵⁶⁰ *Dignitatis Humanae*, 1; *Lumen Gentium*, 8; *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 8.

⁵⁶¹ Francis A. Sullivan, “Notes of the Church,” in René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, ed., *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 2000), 174.

⁵⁶² Cf. Christopher Hitchens, *god is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Hachette, 2007); Sam Harris, *The End of Faith* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005).

attentive to a more broadly ecumenical era. Says Sullivan: “there is reason to hope that in the future a Catholic apologist will be able to base the *via notarum* on an understanding of these properties that would represent at least a convergence, if not a full convergence, that had been achieved through ecumenical study and dialogue.”⁵⁶³

Unlike the strict use of the *via notarum*, which was used to argue for Catholic Christianity, the argument of this paper will uphold and defend a contemporary version of the *via empirica*—itself a form of the *via notarum*.⁵⁶⁴ Here credibility is given on behalf of the Divine Founder, not to the doctrinal distinctives of any one church.

By definition grace manifests itself in persons and changes *them* for the better. *That* is why this argument should always remain valid, even in a post-conciliar church.

As Joseph A. Komonchak observes,

The church’s very existence is supposed to make the world different. It would be a mistake, then, to imagine a tension, much less a dichotomy, between the texts of the council that, to use a not entirely happy distinction made at the time, speak of the *Ecclesia ad intra* and those that speak of the *Ecclesia ad extra*, to contrast a theological to a sociological or historical approach to the Church, or to divide the theological notions of the Church up between these two pretended oppositions. It is true, of course, that some notions direct attention more clearly than others to one or another of these dimensions, but it is a single dynamic historical agent that these dimensions constitute and these notions describe. . . . The mystery of the Church is realized in the history of the world.⁵⁶⁵

Each of the four marks logically implies the presence of the others. God’s grace brings people together (unity), and it enables them to reach their potential as human beings (holiness). Part of what it means to be a human is to be inclusive towards others

⁵⁶³ Sullivan, “Notes of the Church,” 174.

⁵⁶⁴ Allusions to the *via empirica* can be found in Hans Küng, *The Church*, 3-39. Also relevant is Dennis Hollinger, “The Church as Apologetic: A Sociology of Knowledge Perspective,” in Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, (eds.), *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World* (Downer’s Grove: InterVarsity, 1995), 182-193.

⁵⁶⁵ Joseph A. Komonchak, “The Significance of Vatican Council II for Ecclesiology,” in Patrick Granfield and Peter C. Phan, (eds.), *The Gift of the Church* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2000), 90, 91. See also Joseph A. Komonchak, ‘Ecclesiology of Vatican II’, *Origins*, 28.44, (April 22, 1999), 768; Sullivan, *The Church We Believe In*, 17.

(catholicity). With this spiritual connection, there is historical continuity with other believers, reaching backward into the past (apostolicity).

The notion that the church in its concrete existence can provide testimony to its Divine Founder has never been absent in Christian thought.⁵⁶⁶ As the French Catholic theologian René Latourelle once noted: “The argument is a traditional one in the church. From the first centuries, the Fathers, primarily Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, and Augustine, appealed to it to defend Christianity, its miraculous spread, the constancy of its martyrs, and the brilliance of its holiness.”⁵⁶⁷ In modern theology the argument was eventually taken up by Savonarola, Bossuet, Pascal, Lacordaire, Bautin, Dechamps, Kleutgen, and Franzelin.

As a result of its widespread acceptance in the church, the argument was dogmatically defined at the First Vatican Council (1869-1870). Vatican II (1962-1965) followed the theology of Vatican I, but it did not call the church a “moral miracle.” Instead it spoke of the church as a “sign to the nations.”⁵⁶⁸ In other places the Council Fathers assert that Christianity helps change the world for the better.⁵⁶⁹ Conversely, the world’s ominous doctrines, when construed apart from the values of true religion, will gradually destroy the fabric of society.⁵⁷⁰ Let us now turn to some philosophical and theological arguments to understand how Christian belief is thought to make a moral difference in the lives of its constituents.

The Inner-Rationale of Catholic Beliefs and the Difference it Makes

⁵⁶⁶ Augustine, *City of God*, bk. 22; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I, 6.

⁵⁶⁷ René Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation* (New York: Alba House, 1966), 417, 418.

⁵⁶⁸ *Lumen Gentium*, 1.

⁵⁶⁹ Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 35, 46.

⁵⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 36.

Traditional Catholic theology holds that the strongest form of moral motivation can only be discovered by receiving God's grace, culminating in a life that is lived in relationship with him. God's special infusion of grace is the necessary ingredient to live out the virtues in the way they are intended to be lived out. Healing the person, God's grace brings the acquired virtues to fulfillment by elevating believers to perform supernatural acts, securing them on the right path to their final end. These supernatural acts cannot be performed unless one receives God's grace.

Rather than merely stating that grace makes believers more virtuous than they would be without I (which would be an unapologetic way of putting it!), there are at least four reasons that can be philosophically adduced to provide an inner-rationale of the difference Christianity makes in the world. Only someone who has faith will recognize the effects of receiving grace, but unbelievers can still apprehend the intrinsic connection between Christian beliefs and the way in which they develop stronger forms of moral motivation.

First, because human life does not end in death in a Christian universe, all persons are held accountable for their actions during their earthly lives. In the end the scales of justice will finally be balanced, and righteousness will prevail over evil. Every evil will be transformed for the greater good. In turn every decision that is made by Christians in this lifetime has eternal significance because there is something to hope for in the end.⁵⁷¹ Christian believers can, therefore, make decisions that run strongly against temporal pressures and embrace acts of extreme self-sacrifice for the greater good. As Linda Zagzebski says: "the moral life involves more than time and effort. At least some of the

⁵⁷¹ Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, N. 20, 21, 34, 39, 43.

time it involves the sacrifice of self-interest. It is not rational, however, to give up a known good unless it is probable that the sacrifice really is for a greater good.”⁵⁷²

Second, belief in the Christian God provides moral resolution in a world which is highly pluralistic and uncertain with respect to moral matters.⁵⁷³ Moral pluralism can easily lead to moral skepticism and despair, making it easy, if not inevitable, to doubt the moral efficacy of human beings altogether. The problem with atheism is that not only is objective morality undermined, but so is rational thought.⁵⁷⁴ A world of total and unmitigated “chance” is not a world of reason, but of chaos. Rational beliefs may help us in our struggle for survival, but the worldview of atheistic materialism does not build up persons’ confidence in helping them to know that their beliefs about the world are true.

Sometimes moral skepticism makes it seemingly irrational to sacrifice oneself for another for their greater good because there is no guarantee that this is precisely what is needed in certain ethical contexts. In this way, skepticism can lead to a deprivation of the motivating force in building virtue. As Zagzebski asserts, moral skepticism “does not take away the natural desire to be moral, but it does take away the motivating force because morality is intimately connected with feelings, commitments, sacrifices, expectations, and hopes. The moral life involves risk; both because of the personal sacrifices it requires and because of the emotional commitments it involves.”⁵⁷⁵ In order to transcend the impasse, something must provide moral guidance, to wit,—something such as a divine revelation⁵⁷⁶ and providence.

⁵⁷² Linda Zagzebski, “Does Ethics Need God?,” *Faith and Philosophy*, 4.3, (July 1987), 295.

⁵⁷³ *Gaudium et Spes*, 33.

⁵⁷⁴ Victor Reppert, *C.S. Lewis’ Dangerous Idea* (Downer’s Grove: InterVarsity, 2003).

⁵⁷⁵ Zagzebski, ‘Does Ethics Need God?’ 299.

⁵⁷⁶ For example, the revelation of the Trinity reinforces and makes clear the importance of human community. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, N. 813, 2205.

Third, if one embraces the moral point of view, then one needs the satisfaction of knowing that they will have a reasonable chance of success at being moral. Atheists—whether they are of the critical or practical variety—do not have the benefit of knowing that they will have a good chance of success at being moral because there are so many factors outside of their control that prevent them from reaching their full potential within the limited amount of time they have to live. As Robert Adams observes: “Having to regard it as very likely that the history of the universe will not be good on the whole, no matter what one does, seems apt to induce a cynical sense of futility about the moral life, undermining one’s moral resolve and one’s interest in moral consequences.”⁵⁷⁷

Belief in the living, revealed God, by contrast, enables one to overcome moral weakness and inefficacy when facing the difficulties of moral living. The grace that manifests itself in the infused virtues provides one with a greater chance of moral success in facing the challenge of living the moral life.

Fourth, Catholic belief in the communion of saints helps believers to live a more moral life by removing the feeling of cosmic loneliness, which can lead to despair. At the heart of this doctrine is the belief that there is a communication of spiritual gifts among the elect. This sharing includes those who have passed into the next life. With this conception of spiritual communication in mind, believers become more conscious of their obligation to contribute to the common good and also the extent to which they are indebted to others for their own spiritual blessings. All believers, regardless of their situation—no matter how dismal life might appear—can contribute to the betterment of

⁵⁷⁷ Robert Adams, “Moral Arguments for Theistic Belief,” in C.F. Delaney, (ed.), *Rationality and Religious Belief* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1979), 127.

the entire world through their lived example, prayer, and other spiritual sacrifices (even if they are performed alone or in secret).⁵⁷⁸

Now these arguments are suggestive and not individually probative. Each piece of evidence is presented to create a cumulative case argument. An accumulated amount of evidence, while unable to be persuasive if one takes one piece at a time, becomes more persuasive when combined together. By no means are these four points comprehensive accounts of the inner-rationale of Catholic or Christian beliefs; other doctrines could certainly be included. The point is that Christianity enables believers to embrace a distinctive life view that seems incapable of being reached in worldviews antithetical to Christianity. Ideas have consequences. Beliefs affect behavior. And doctrine helps to determine devotion.

Given the inner-rationale of Christianity, we should expect empirical traces of the influence it has left in those societies it has deeply permeated. Karl Rahner once drew attention to this: “God really *has* redeemed, he really *has* poured out his Spirit, he really *has* done mighty things for sinners, he *has* let his light shine in the darkness. . . she {meaning the church} must not declare this merely as a *possibility* provided by God. . . as if one could merely ‘presume’ that God has poured out his Spirit without giving any evidence at all of his mighty wind and his tongues of fire.”⁵⁷⁹

The church can count a large number of believers who have lived as heroic exemplars of sanctity in every historical age and circumstance. So confident is the church’s belief in the effects of Christianity that she has declared that the church itself is

⁵⁷⁸ Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, II: 60, 61.

⁵⁷⁹ Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* (New York: Crossroad, 1975), III: 94.

a motive of credibility.⁵⁸⁰ Exemplifying a type of sacrament, the church “is not a force or entity which exists in its own right. On the contrary, it points away from itself, and beyond itself.”⁵⁸¹ The transformation of so many people in so many different cultures across the ages is so impressive that it requires an explanation.

Prospects for Developing the Via Empirica

Observations from history strongly suggest that Christianity has contributed to an improvement in the physical, scientific, artistic, social, and political lives of countless individuals.⁵⁸² Observations also suggest that Christianity has contributed to violence, but I will address this issue in the second half of the chapter. As for now, I will focus on the positive apologetic issues involved with the *via empirica*. The church’s beliefs and practices are distinctive in the sense that they form the worldviews of individuals to perceive reality in a certain way, inaugurating the Kingdom of God “on earth as it is in heaven.”

Now, only someone who has faith will recognize the mystery of the four marks, but reason can apprehend the change that Christianity has had on a civilization. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* remarks: “Only faith can recognize that the Church possesses these properties [i.e., the four marks] from her divine source. But their historical manifestations are signs that also speak clearly to human reason. As the First Vatican Council noted, the ‘Church herself, with her marvelous propagation, eminent holiness, and inexhaustible fruitfulness in everything good, her catholic unity and

⁵⁸⁰ For an apologetic discussion of the church as sacrament, see Avery Dulles, *A Church to Believe In: Discipleship and the Dynamics of Freedom* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 41-52.

⁵⁸¹ Walter Kasper, *Theology and Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 117.

⁵⁸² George Kurian, (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization*, 4 vols. (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

invincible stability, is a great and perpetual motive of credibility and an irrefutable witness of her divine mission'.⁵⁸³

Some detractors might note that historical effects are usually accounted for by multiple causes, not just one. Thus Christian beliefs cannot be exclusively responsible for any particular historical effect. It is true that historical effects usually have more than one cause, but this does not mean that historians cannot posit specifically Christian beliefs that are widespread in the culture as a necessary cause for certain widespread effects. Because various causes have different values and contribute to forming various phenomena in history, historians rarely affirm that entire movements and institutions can be accounted for by a single cause. Many necessary causes, however, might contribute to the ongoing influence of historical effects. Christianity is thought to be a major contributor to the positive differences made in different cultures.

The following areas of research are not usually written with apologetic intentions, but they do happen to coincide with the apologists' use of the four marks. Beginning with the assumption that Christian beliefs can make a difference for the greater good, it is now time to briefly introduce the relevant evidence that seems to confirm the soundness of the philosophical arguments in the last section. We now turn, then, to some *prospects* for developing the *via empirica*. Readers are encouraged to consult the footnotes for developing the argument in more specific ways.

From the beginning of the Christian movement, a tradition developed in which believers encouraged the use of reason and celebrated the possibility of progress in light of their eschatological outlook. Unlike many other religions, which are focused on law, Christianity was a religion based on grace by which the fecundity of theological

⁵⁸³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, N. 812.

reasonings were made possible. Theological development is taken seriously in Christianity. Reason itself is seen as a gift from God. While many other religions are based on mystery, intuition, “esoteric knowledge” (*gnosis*), or even belief in capricious, humanlike deities, Christianity embraces reason and logic as God-given guides to understand unchanging religious truth.

Christianity continued to spread rapidly throughout Europe into the middle ages. Its unique emphasis on rational theology and eschatology continued to transform its adherents and entire societies. Though some antiquated works of history claim that after the Roman Empire collapsed Europe eventually entered the so-called “Dark Ages,” contemporary scholars repeatedly call this contention into disrepute. Rapid intellectual and material progress began as soon as the church escaped from Roman rule and Greek idealism. Consequently, medieval Europe soon surpassed the rest of the world in science, culture and technology.⁵⁸⁴

Innovations in productive capability, including advanced military weaponry and improved transportation, were all significant features of medieval Europe. In the words of Rodney Stark: “So much progress took place during the so-called Dark Ages that by no later than the thirteenth century, Europe had forged far ahead of Rome and Greece, and ahead of the rest of the world as well. Why? Primarily because Christianity taught

⁵⁸⁴ Christopher Dawson, *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture* (New York: Doubleday, 1991); Lynn White, *Medieval Religion and Technology* (Berkeley: University of California, 1978); Jean Gimpel, *The Medieval Machine: The Industrial Revolution of the Middle Ages* (New York: Penguin, 1976); Frances and Joseph Gies, *Cathedral, Forge and Waterwheel: Technology and Invention in the Middle Ages* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995); Rodney Stark, *The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success*, (New York: Random House, 2006); Stephen Harris and Bryon L. Grigsby, *Misconceptions About the Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

that progress was ‘normal’ and that ‘new inventions would always be forthcoming.’ This was the revolutionary idea.⁵⁸⁵

The novelty of Christian beliefs helps to explain why the new faith was able to grow at such an astounding rate. Outsiders found the strict nature of Christian belief attractive,⁵⁸⁶ including its exclusive stance with respect to other religions.⁵⁸⁷ Christianity, moreover, was unlike any other religion at the time. Unlike Judaism and many other religions, it did not discriminate on the basis of gender and social class. Christians called on everyone to repent and believe in the Gospel.⁵⁸⁸

Christian worship was highly intense in the face of the mundane liturgies of ancient Judaism.⁵⁸⁹ To be sure, earliest worship practices featured the belief that God was active in the midst of ritual action.⁵⁹⁰ The attitude in worship was not passive, but was one in which the believer could expect to be changed by the Spirit. The intense charismatic experience of the early Christians was highly attractive to outsiders.⁵⁹¹

Gerald O’Collins writes:

A number of ‘this-worldly’ factors, which help explain the propagation of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Islam by the Gautama, Confucius, and Muhammed, respectively, do not apply to Christianity. . . In these three instances we can point to publicly verifiable causes which furthered the spread, respectively, of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Islam: the long careers of the founders, financial resources, and success in battle. In the case of Christianity, the founder enjoyed none of these advantages: his public career was extremely short, he lacked military and financial support, and his life ended in a humiliating failure and a disgraceful death on a cross. After all this, the subsequent propagation of the message of universal salvation in his name remains an enigmatic puzzle unless we admit a cause . . . adequate to account for the effect.⁵⁹²

⁵⁸⁵ Stark, *The Victory of Reason*, 54, 55.

⁵⁸⁶ Larry W. Hurtado, *At the Origins of Christian Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 4; idem, *Lord Jesus Christ*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 483, 484, 650.

⁵⁸⁷ Hurtado, *At the Origins of Christian Worship*, 18; cf. 39; idem, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 77, 402.

⁵⁸⁸ Ibid., 46.

⁵⁸⁹ Ibid., 53, 55.

⁵⁹⁰ Ibid., 56, 57.

⁵⁹¹ Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 134-53, 619-24, 649-53.

⁵⁹² Gerald O’Collins, *Easter Faith* (Mahwah: Paulist, 2003), 40.

To be more precise, the rapid rise and success of Christianity in the face of contrary pressure cries out for some sort of an explanation. Thus the Christians' refusal to accommodate the substance of their worship in the face of alternative pressure, and the rapid rise and success of worshipping a *crucified Messiah* in the face of secular opposition should all be exploited.⁵⁹³

Closely linked to the Christian concern for reason and innovative progress is the endorsement of natural law principles. No matter one's race, religion, or gender, every human being is created in the image of God. Different understandings of natural law can certainly be found in Greco-Roman cultures before the rise of Christianity, but it was Christian thinkers who held that *God* was the author of nature. This deeply held conviction set the stage for the defense of human integrity and universal rights in later centuries.⁵⁹⁴ Reference to human dignity is used to defend labor and economic freedom.⁵⁹⁵ It has also played a significant role in liberation movements.⁵⁹⁶

Although it may seem obvious today that everyone is created equal under God, the historical evidence points in the opposite direction. Without the influence of

⁵⁹³ Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement became the World's Largest Religion* (New York: HarperOne, 2011).

⁵⁹⁴ For Christian conceptions of natural law, see Jacques Maritain, *The Rights of Man and the Natural Law*, trans. Doris C. Anson (New York: Gordian, 1971); David Hollenbach, *Claims in Conflict: Retrieving and Renewing the Catholic Human Rights Tradition* (New York: Paulist, 1979); Michael Schuck, *That They May Be One: The Social Teaching of the Papal Encyclicals 1740-1989* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 1991); Peter F. Ryan, "Secularist and Christian Views of Human Nature and its Fulfillment: Implications for Bioethics and Environmentalism", in Daniel Robinson, Gladys M. Sweeney and Richard Gill, (eds.), *Human Nature in Its Wholeness: A Roman Catholic Perspective* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 2006), 57-79; Jürgen Moltmann, *On Human Dignity: Political Theology and Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007); Jean Porter, *Ministers of the Law: A Natural Law Theory of Legal Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

⁵⁹⁵ Alvin J. Schmidt, *How Christianity Changed the World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 194-217; Thomas E. Woods, *How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 2005), 187-216.

⁵⁹⁶ Christopher Rowland, (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2002); Susan Frank Parsons, (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2002).

Christian faith, it is not at all evident that equality trumps inequality given the various strengths, talents, and circumstances of so many different individuals. Because God creates and loves each person infinitely, however, everyone has intrinsic value in Christianity.

Christianity's revolutionary ideas about human beings eventually contributed to opposition to slavery.⁵⁹⁷ When we look at the relationship between Christianity and slaveholding, it must be admitted that the church originated and later developed in a world teeming with slavery. Because the institution of slavery was so widespread and uncontested in so many parts of the world, it was rarely protested against.⁵⁹⁸ Hence one might argue that the history of *humanity* is a history of slavery. The church may have been the only organized group that eventually 'declared the diminution, if not the final elimination, of slavery to be meritorious'.⁵⁹⁹ Even though it may have taken centuries to abolish this repugnant practice in many places, Christians can be credited for overthrowing it at times.

Similar circumstances apply in the development of women's rights. While the earliest churches did not immediately protest against patriarchy, it elevated the status of women in the face of Greco-Roman pressures to the contrary.⁶⁰⁰ So different were the ways that Christians treated women in the ancient world that the Romans scorned the new religious sect as being effeminate and soft, lacking strong male virtues such as justice.

⁵⁹⁷ One of the best discussions on the overthrow of slavery by Christian groups is found in Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts, and the End of Slavery* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2003), 291-376.

⁵⁹⁸ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1982), 27, 28.

⁵⁹⁹ Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity* (New York: Atheneum, 1987), 437.

⁶⁰⁰ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1996), 95-128.

Another fascinating area of research should center on the impact of Christian theology upon the elevation of sexual norms.⁶⁰¹ The new standard set by the early Christians has had a monumental impact on civilization. Detractors of Christian morality, on the other hand, have argued that Christians borrowed their ideas about sex from Greek philosophies and religions. But this contention is not at all sustainable in the face of contemporary scholarship. As Kathy L. Gaca concluded in her groundbreaking study, *The Making of Fornication*, “Foucault and others are therefore mistaken in maintaining that ‘the codes in themselves did not change a great deal’ between Greek and Christian Greek sexual principles. Paul’s unconditional imperative to flee fornication was radically new to the Greeks and other Gentiles, and its aim was to supplant religious sexual existence as they lived it, or, in the case of the philosophers, as they conceived it should be lived.”⁶⁰²

The impulse of reason in the service of faith also gave impetus to the weighing and assessing of evidence to understand God and his relationship with the world.⁶⁰³ Eventually the intellectual milieu of the medieval period culminated into the university system.⁶⁰⁴ As one noteworthy commentator reports, the “university was a Christian

⁶⁰¹ Kathy L. Gaca, *The Making of Fornication: Eros, Ethics, and Political Reform in Greek Philosophy and Early Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California, 2003). Also relevant is Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University, 1988).

⁶⁰² Kathy L. Gaca, *The Making of Fornication*, 293.

⁶⁰³ Pierre Riche, *Education and Culture in the Barbarian West: From the Sixth through the Eighth Century*, trans. John Contreni (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1976); Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and The Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture* (New York: Fordham University, 1982).

⁶⁰⁴ Hastings Rashdall, *The Universities of Europe in the Middle Ages*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University, 1936); Nathan Schachner, *The Mediaeval Universities* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1938); Charles Haskins, *The Rise of Universities* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1957); Lowrie Daly, *The Medieval University, 1200-1400* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961); Alan B. Cobban, *The Medieval Universities: Their Development and Organization* (Chatham, U.K.: Methuen, 1975); Hilde de Ridder-Symnoens, ed., *A History of the University in Europe: Universities in the Middle Ages*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1992); Marica L. Colish, *Medieval Foundations of the Western Intellectual Tradition, 400-1400* (New Haven: Yale University, 1997); Olaf Pedersen, *The First Universities: Studium Generale and the*

invention that evolved from cathedral schools established to train monks and priests.⁶⁰⁵

According to Rodney Stark:

... was not a monastery or place for meditation. Rather, as Marcia L. Colish put it, 'The scholastics who created this heady educational environment rapidly outpaced monastic scholars as speculative thinkers.' The key word here is '*speculative*.' The medieval universities were unlike Chinese academics for training Mandarins or a Zen master's school. They were not primarily concerned with imparting the received wisdom. Rather, just as is the case today, faculty gained fame and invitations to join faculties elsewhere by *innovation*.

The results were entirely predictable: factions formed and reformed; new schools of thought abounded; controversy became the dominant fact of scholarly life. In a world over which One True Church claimed exclusive doctrinal authority, the spirit of free inquiry cultivated in the universities made theology the *revolutionary* discipline. As increasingly large numbers of learned scholars pored over scriptures in search of original insights, inevitably they often reached contradictory conclusions, some of which prompted serious religious conflict and dissent.⁶⁰⁶

The medieval university simply cannot be compared to the academy of Greece or Rome.⁶⁰⁷ Correlatively, the medieval church was the first organized institution in the world that showed consistent interest in the cultivation and preservation of knowledge. The lineage of modern universities can be traced back to medieval universities such as Bologna, Paris, Oxford, and Cambridge, not Greece or Rome.⁶⁰⁸

The emphasis on God and reason also helped spur the rise of modern science. Historians now almost universally recognize that the modern scientific revolution would have been manifestly impossible without deeply embedded Christian philosophical presuppositions in those societies where science originated.⁶⁰⁹ Though we might take

Origins of University Education in Europe, trans. Richard North (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1997); Edward Grant, *God and Reason in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2001).

⁶⁰⁵ Stark, *For the Glory of God*, 62.

⁶⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁶⁰⁷ Cobban, *The Medieval Universities*, 22; Peterson, *The First Universities*, xi.

⁶⁰⁸ Haskins, *The Rise of Universities*, 5.

⁶⁰⁹ Stanley Jaki, *The Origin of Science and the Science of its Origin* (Jedburgh: Scottish Academic, 1979); Edward Grant, *The Foundations of Modern Science in the Middle Ages: Their Religious, Institutional, and Intellectual Contexts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Reijer Hooykaas, *Religion and the Rise of Modern Science* (New York: Regent, 2000); Peter E. Hodgson, *Theology and Modern Physics* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2005); Stephen Barr, *Modern Physics and Ancient Faith* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2006); David C. Lindberg, *The Beginnings of Western Science: The European Scientific Tradition in Philosophical, Religious, and Institutional Contexts, Prehistory to A.D.*

science and the orderly nature of creation for granted today, belief in a transcendent, personal Creator who endows creation with orderly laws eventually provided the fathers of modern science with some of the necessary intellectual resources for a quantitative analysis of the universe. At the time western Europe was deeply influenced by the rational theology of the scholastics and the university's emphasis on speculative thinking.

In Christianity all of creation is seen to reflect the rationality of the Creator. Science developed because of the belief that creation is a cosmos (being orderly), not chaotic or animistic as in other religions and cultures. Scripture lent support to the rationality of the universe in late antiquity, and this subsequently laid the foundations for understanding the world in a certain way. Conversely, non-Christian cultures did not have the intellectual resources needed for the development of science as traditionally understood.

Stanley Jaki and many others have argued that these civilizations worked out of conceptual frameworks that hindered the growth of science. Jaki extended his thesis to several civilizations as test cases and demonstrated that in each of them science was unable to develop as a result of non-Christian conceptions of reality: Arabic, Babylonian, Chinese, Egyptian, Greek, Hindu, and Mayan.⁶¹⁰ Conversely, it seems that the decline of Christianity in the West will only harm the advancement of science (especially the biological, chemical, and physical sciences). As the British physicist Peter Hodgson

1450, 2d. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2008); Stephen Gaukroger, *The Emergence of a Scientific Culture: Science and the Shaping of Modernity 1210-1685* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2009); Margaret J. Osler, *Reconfiguring the World: Nature, God, and Human Understanding from the Middle Ages to Early Modern Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2010); Ronald L. Numbers, *Galileo Goes to Jail and Other Modern Myths*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2010); James Hannon, *The Genesis of Science: How the Christian Middle Ages Launched the Scientific Revolution* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery 2011).

⁶¹⁰ Stanley Jaki, *Science and Creation: From Eternal Cycles to an Oscillating Universe* (New York: University Press of America, 1974).

recognizes: “While there are many causes for the decline of science, the decline of Christian belief must be among them.”⁶¹¹

Belief in one God is one of the single most influential beliefs of western civilization.⁶¹² Science seems to vindicate this conclusion. Over the last few years, a cumulating amount of research has confirmed the notion that spirituality has a positive influence on human well-being and longevity. Believers are happier, healthier, and live longer than their unbelieving counterparts. Affirmed with consistency in the medical community, researchers maintain that belief in God and human health grow in direct, not in inverse proportion with one another.⁶¹³ As W.R. Miller and C.E. Thoreson assert: “It is hardly news that spirituality and religion can have an important influence on human health and behavior. Religious resources figure prominently among the methods that people call on when coping with life stress and illness.”⁶¹⁴

The causal relationship between religion and health is occasionally challenged by projection theorists and their nineteenth century forebears (i.e., Freud, Marx, and

⁶¹¹ Hodgson, *Theology and Modern Physics*, 221.

⁶¹² Rodney Stark, *One True God: The Historical Consequences of Monotheism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 2001).

⁶¹³ Paul C. Vitz, *The Faith of the Fatherless: The Psychology of Atheism* (Dallas: Spence, 2000); Kenneth I. Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping: Theory, Research Practice*, (New York: Guilford, 2001); Jeff Levin, *God, Faith and Health: Exploring the Spirituality-Healing Connection* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2001); Eugene D’Aquili and Andrew B. Newberg, *Why God Won’t Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2002); Marc Galanter, *Spirituality and the Healthy Mind: Science, Therapy, and the Need for Personal Meaning* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2005); Harold G. Koenig and Harvey J. Cohen, *The Link Between Religion and Health: Psychoneuroimmunology and the Faith Factor* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2005); Andrew B. Newberg and Mark Robert Waldman, *How God Changes Your Brain: Breakthrough Findings From a Leading Neuroscientist* (New York: Ballantine, 2008); Harold G. Koenig, *Medicine, Religion, and Health: Where Science and Spirituality Meet* (West Conshohocken: Templeton Press, 2008).

⁶¹⁴ William R. Miller and Carl E. Thoreson, “Spirituality, Religion, and Health: An Emerging Research Field,” *American Psychologist*, 58 (2003), 24. Cf. A.J. Weaver et al., “A Systematic Review of Research on Religion and Spirituality in the *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 1990-1999,” *Mental Health, Religion, and Culture*, 6 (2003), 215-228.

Feuerbach),⁶¹⁵ but the thing to keep in mind is that these challenges do not square with the prevailing clinical evidence. As Miller and Thoreson recognize:

In the spirit of two-tailed tests, clearly research on religion should examine both its positive and its negative potential effects on health. Certainly misuses and abuses exist within religion, as they do in any significant social institution. Apart from such distortions of religion, however, it is entirely possible that certain religious beliefs or practices are associated with adverse health effects. At present there is no substantial base of empirical evidence regarding negative effects of religion on health (Thoresen et al., in press). If research on health benefits of religion has been widely avoided within mainstream psychology, well designed studies of its potential adverse effects appear to have been even more shunned.⁶¹⁶

The projection theory is not a scientific one, but a philosophical contention—and a highly presuppositional one at that. Freud himself once said: “Let us be quite clear on the point that the views expressed in my book [i.e., *The Future of an Illusion*] form no part of analytic theory. They are my personal views.”⁶¹⁷ Indeed, Freud had very little acquaintance with patients who believed in God. Nor did he ever publish a report based on hard evidence garnered from working with believers.⁶¹⁸

Yet another area of apologetic research should focus on the emergence of charitable organizations, health care, and organized hospitals in the patristic and medieval periods.⁶¹⁹ Because Jesus taught the importance of unconditional love, countless forms

⁶¹⁵ One detractor would be Richard P. Sloan, *Blind Faith: The Unholy Alliance of Religion and Medicine* (New York: St. Martin's, 2006).

⁶¹⁶ William R. Miller and Carl E. Thoreson, “Spirituality, Religion, and Health: An Emerging Research Field,” 32.

⁶¹⁷ Sigmund Freud and Oscar Pfister, *Psychoanalysis and Faith: The Letters of Sigmund Freud and Oscar Pfister*, ed. H. Meng and H. French, trans. E. Mosbacher, (New York: Basic Books, 1962), 117.

⁶¹⁸ Vitz, *The Faith of the Fatherless*, 8, 9. Some will interpret the evidence and argue that spirituality can be reduced to complex physical mechanisms alone. But others will argue that *all* human experience has a neurobiological and electrochemical component to it. The latter argue that brain processes are the proximate cause of how people experience God, but the ultimate cause is due to the extra-mental reality of God himself. Until the projection theorist can explain why a single-layered explanation of the evidence should be preferred, this interpretation remains a valid one. Cf. John F. Haught, *Is Nature Enough? Meaning and Truth in the Age of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2006).

⁶¹⁹ Martin E. Marty and Kenneth L. Vaux, (eds.), *Health Medicine and the Faith Traditions: An Inquiry into Religion and Medicine*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982); Gary B. Ferngren, “The *Imago Dei* and the Sanctity of Human Life,” in R.M. McMillan, H.T. Englehart, and S.F. Spiker, (eds.), *Euthanasia and the Newborn: Conflicts Regarding Saving Lives* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1987), 23-47; Roberto Margotta, *The History of Medicine* (New York: Smithmark, 1996); Darrel W. Amundsen, Ronald L. Numbers, and Martin

of charitable organizations have formed since the patristic era. Part of the reason for the emergence of monastic orders during the medieval period was to help the poor and help the sick recover from disease.

Critics of this viewpoint have argued that early Christianity was ubiquitously characterized by magical means of healing and other superstitious practices. But this contention is not a convincing argument in light of more recent scholarship.

Contemporary scholars maintain that the churches relied on the best available naturalistic sources of healing in the early medieval period. Moreover, the origin of the medieval hospital was influenced by Christian ideals such as compassion for the patient, regardless of past sins. As Gary Ferngren, an expert in the rise of medicine, explains:

Throughout the Hebrew scriptures one finds the popular view enunciated that illness and disease are God's punishment for sin and wrongdoing. . . . Pagan culture [on the other hand] discouraged all attempts to deal with the sick as a societal problem, in part, because it assumed that the sick were suffering deservedly; in part, because of the pessimism that regarded society as incapable of significant improvement; and, in part, because of a quietism that rejected the desirability of attempting real change in society. The resulting passivity accounts for the failure of state officials to undertake public relief during times of plague and reflects the ease with which ancient societies accepted suffering without undertaking efforts to ameliorate it. Underlying it as well was the belief that plague was retributive, a punishment by the gods on society for some failure of an individual or magistrate that could be removed only by their propitiation.

Unlike the classical world, Christianity rooted its attitude to philanthropy in theology. The impulse behind Christian philanthropy was the encouragement of a self-giving love of one's fellow human beings that reflected the love of God in the Incarnation of Christ and his death for the redemption of the world. . . . The Incarnation of Christ had changed and elevated the human body, including that of lepers. Their bodies transmitted their holiness to those who had cared for them.⁶²⁰

E. Marty, (eds.), *Caring and Curing: Health and Medicine in the Western Religious Traditions* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1997); Timothy R. Miller, *The Birth of the Hospital in the Byzantine Empire* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1997); Guenter B. Risse, *Mending Bodies, Saving Souls: A History of Hospitals* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1999); Hector Avalos, *Healthcare and the Rise of Christianity* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999); Gary B. Ferngren, "Medicine and Compassion in Early Christianity," *Theology Digest*, 46.4 (1999), 1-12; Darrel W. Amundsen, *Medicine, Society, and Faith in the Ancient and Medieval Worlds* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2000); Amanda Porterfield, *Healing in the History of Christianity*, (Oxford: Oxford University, 2005); Andrew D. Crislip, *From Monastery to Hospital: Christian Monasticism and the Transformation of Health Care in Late Antiquity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2005); Robert B. Baker and Laurence B. McCullough, (eds.) *The Cambridge World History of Medical Ethics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2008); Gary B. Ferngren, *Medicine and Health Care in Early Christianity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2009).

⁶²⁰ Ferngren, *Medicine and Health Care in Early Christianity*, pp. 142, 144, 143.

The church's interest in physical healing was intimately linked to its concern to fulfill the Great Commission. Undoubtedly the rise of Christian faith helped spur the emergence of health care and medicine.

On another front, believers have depicted the created world and the events of salvation history in different forms of artistic expression across the ages.⁶²¹ Since belief in the incarnation is taken to mean, in part, that God has elevated the creation to a new level, creation should be appreciated. Indeed, one would be hard pressed to find an art historian that denies the positive influence of Christian faith on art. Despite the repeated attempts of iconoclasts, the Magisterium has consistently defended art as a form of spiritual expression by referring to theological principles.⁶²² Inspired by the Scriptural conviction that the world is orderly and capable of being pondered, for instance, Christian artists seek to construct their work according to “measure, number, and weight” (Wisdom 11:21).⁶²³

⁶²¹ Aidan Nichols, *The Art of God Incarnate: Theology and Image in Christian Tradition* (Mahwah: Paulist, 1980); John Saward, *The Beauty of Holiness and the Holiness of Beauty: Art, Sanctity, and the Truth of Catholicism* (Ignatius, 1997); Richard Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty and Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); idem, *Theology and the Arts: Encountering God Through Music, Art and Rhetoric* (Mahwah: Paulist, 2000).

For published works of Catholic art theory and history, see Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1972); Dennis McNally, *Sacred Space: An Aesthetic for the Liturgical Environment* (Lima: Wyndam Hall, 1985); Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1997); Dennis McNally, *Fearsome Edifice: A History of the Decorated Domus in Catholic Churches* (Lima: Wyndam Hall, 2002); Ross King, *Michaelangelo and the Pope's Ceiling* (New York: Walker and Company, 2003); Judith Dupre, *Full of Grace: Encountering Mary in Faith, Art and Life* (New York: Random House, 2010); Dennis McNally, *Art for Church: Cloth of Gold, Cloak of Led* (Lanham: Hamilton, 2011).

⁶²² For a discussion of the Catholic Church's response to iconoclasm, for instance, see Leo Donald Davis, *The First Ecumenical Councils (325-787): Their History and Theology* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1987), 290-305. For a contemporary Catholic endorsement of art, see John Paul II's *Letter to Artists* (1999). Also relevant is Benedict XVI's meeting with artists on November 21, 2009. Both of these writings can be found on the Vatican website.

⁶²³ John W. Baldwin, *The Scholastic Culture of the Middle Ages 1000-1300* (Lexington: D.C Heath, 1971), 107; Robert A. Scott, *The Gothic Enterprise* (Berkeley: University of California, 2003), 124-125.

Many examples immediately come to mind: the Sistine Chapel, Da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, Michaelangelo's *Pieta*, and Rembrandt's *Christ at Emmaus* and *Simeon in the Temple*. Veronese, Titian, and Tintoretto are responsible for painting some of the most well-known murals in Europe. These can all be found in Venice. Who can ignore Handel's *Messiah*, Mozart's *Requiem*, and the music of Johann Sebastian Bach? Not to be overlooked, the centerpiece of medieval art is the gothic cathedral. As Paul Johnson writes: "The medieval cathedrals of Europe . . . are the greatest accomplishments of humanity in the whole theatre of art."⁶²⁴

No impartial historian denies that some of the most memorable works of literature have also come from Christians: Dante, Shakespeare, and Milton. The point here is not to say that these artistic works were produced by Christians. Rather, the more forceful (and interesting) claim is that Christian beliefs provided these geniuses of art with a distinctive way of expressing themselves. This influence has been so monumental that even critics of the church have, in many cases, borrowed from Christian themes to convey the points that they do. Take Goethe's *Faust* as an example. In the story the allegory of suffering is derived from Christian views on suffering.

Response to Objectors to the Via Empirica

A major criticism of this argument is that high levels of morality (and human benefits) can be found outside the institutional church.⁶²⁵ As the atheist sociologist Phil Zuckerman recognizes, "nations marked by high levels of organic atheism—such as Sweden or the Netherlands—are among the healthiest, wealthiest, best educated, and

⁶²⁴ Paul Johnson, *Art: A New History* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 153.

⁶²⁵ Phil Zuckerman, *Society Without God: What the Least Religious Nations Can Tell Us About Contentment* (New York: New York University, 2008).

freest societies on earth.”⁶²⁶ Now, casting aside the difficult contention of having to show that these societies have never been affected by Christian beliefs in either a direct or indirect manner, the more important thing for Christians to remember is that Christian beliefs and the concrete expression of the marks do not *always* go hand in hand. Vatican II does not endorse the exclusivist viewpoint in the strict sense of the term. Catholic theology does not hold that holiness can only be found in those cultures influenced by the church. Because grace is not a quantitative thing, holiness can be found outside the influence of institutional Catholicism.

So if the claim of the *via empirica* is that holiness can *only* be found in those societies influenced by the Christian world-view, then of course Zuckerman’s findings gain some force. Unlike fundamentalist advocates of Christian faith, mainstream theologians do not argue that holiness can *only* be found in Christian communities and/or societies. Zuckerman repeatedly caricatures the Christian view as a strict exclusivism.⁶²⁷ But the *via empirica* claims that, all things being equal, Christianity will make a moral difference. Above I presented four philosophical arguments to elucidate that contention, and it is confirmed by recent findings in social sciences. What is more, this evidence itself is not all that controversial.

Vatican II affirms that human beings are the only creatures that God has willed for their own sake.⁶²⁸ Hearing the Gospel is merely an outward sign that God is calling its hearers to a greater relationship with himself, not that he loves those who hear and

⁶²⁶ Phil Zuckerman, “Atheism: Contemporary Numbers and Patterns,” in Michael Martin, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2007), 57. It should be noted that Danes and Swedes do not consider themselves “atheists” in the sense of individuals who deny that God exists. Instead most of them believe in *something*, but they do not usually articulate what it is. See Phil Zuckerman, *Society Without God*, p. 163.

⁶²⁷ Phil Zuckerman, *Society Without God*, 4, 6, 13, 17-20, 29, 31, 128, 151, 162, 167.

⁶²⁸ Cf. Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, N. 24.

respond favorably to the message more than those who remain cognitively ignorant of it. Nor does conciliar teaching hold that God is not working for the betterment of persons in societies outside the influence of Christianity. As Eugene Hillman rightly said: “if there are degrees of holiness among Christians, then we would assume that these same degrees may be actual also among those who, because of their historical situation and through no fault of their own, cannot have explicit faith and historical belief in Jesus Christ. God truly wills the salvation of every member of the human race, not just those who happen to be born in the right time and place.”⁶²⁹

What, then, is the benefit of the institutional church given the multifaceted nature of God’s grace? Given the nature of God’s revelation, believers have the opportunity to point to something tangible in history to substantiate God’s love for the human race. Christ *confirms* divine revelation and gives it a historical, concrete expression.⁶³⁰ Therefore, God is working outside the formal influence of the church, but is explicitly known and reinforced through the church’s teachings. Maurice Boutin observes that “God’s grace is not bound to Christianity, but Christianity is bound to God’s grace, which is for Christian faith Christ’s grace as well. As such, explicit Christianity is the full realization of God’s grace.”⁶³¹ Being a part of the institutional church enables one to have the highest potential of living out the grace of God. By no means is this opportunity always actualized by Catholics.

Thus we should expect to see positive contributions to societies in non-Christian contexts without the outward *sign* of grace we call “the church.” However, spiritual

⁶²⁹ Eugene Hillman, “Evangelization in a Wider Ecumenism: Theological Grounds for Dialogue with Other Religions”, *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 12.1, (Winter 1975): 7.

⁶³⁰ *Dei Verbum*, N. 4.

⁶³¹ Maurice Boutin, “Anonymous Christianity: A Paradigm for Interreligious Encounter,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 20.4, (Fall 1983): 612.

vitality and Christ oriented institutional integrity can only be found in the Catholic Church. God's grace can be detected in places not influenced by institutional Christianity. Grace is not limited to Christians, but is manifested in the world in different times, locations, and degrees. By the grace of God, some "non-Christian" cultures may outshine "Christian" ones. Grace can be indirectly felt in societies affected by the church, but it is not limited to manifesting itself in Catholic (or Christian) circles alone.

This chapter has thus highlighted some of the unique ways that God has graced the institutional church, and it seems to vindicate the idea that Christian belief can make a moral difference in the lives of believers for the better. While it has not shown the superior expression of the marks within Catholicism over other Christianities or even other world religions, it was concerned with undercutting the challenge which says that the Christian faith does more harm than good in the world.

When one thinks of the terrible incidents of church related persecution, including the pettiness and inadequacies of so much daily church life, it becomes easy to doubt the vital work of the Spirit. *Who we are* is more important than what we can *say*. Let us now turn to the negative apologetic concerns with the *via empirica*.

Violence as a Defeater of the Via Empirica?

Perhaps the greatest challenge to the experiential approach is that Christianity has led many of its adherents down the path of violence. Or, Christianity is associated with violence. Indeed, one of the primary arguments in the recent spate of atheist literature is that Christianity causes violence. Steven Pinker is representative of this viewpoint: "religions have given us stonings, witch-burnings, crusades, inquisitions, jihads, fatwas,

suicide bombers, and abortion clinic gunman.”⁶³² He says that humans once believed God commanded them to “massacre Midianites, stone prostitutes, execute homosexuals, slay heretics and infidels, throw Protestants out of windows, withhold medicine from dying children, and crash airplanes into skyscrapers.”⁶³³ Let us be clear about the atheist claim: the argument is not that violence results when religious groups engage in war because the right conditions are in place for a defensive strategy to justify political ends (as proponents of the just war have traditionally maintained), but that Christianity is one of the primary reasons why violence breaks out in the first place.

Attributing violence to the *fundamental* teachings of Christianity—in either a direct or indirect manner—is tantamount to affirming that God is a malevolent God who works through his people to spread evil in the world. On this view, the Christian God is nothing other than an evil god, not an omnibenevolent deity who is concerned with the welfare of the human race. There might as well be no god at all. Steven Weinberg pulls no punches: “Good people will do good things, and bad people will do bad things. But for good people to do bad things—that takes religion.”⁶³⁴

As a Catholic theologian who is concerned with the atheist claims pronounced against Christianity (and not so much against the claims of violence in other religions), I will argue that the new atheists’ claims are refutable. Christians are within their intellectual rights to believe in Christ. Christians who have become violent in the name of the Savior have either knowingly or unknowingly allowed reductive ideologies for religious justification to control their thinking and choices. Christianity does not cause

⁶³² Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), p. 555.

⁶³³ Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate* (New York: Viking, 2002), p. 189.

⁶³⁴ Steven Weinberg, “A Designer Universe?,” *The New York Review of Books*, 46.16 (October 21, 1999): 48.

violence *per se*, but violence that is committed under the banner of Christianity is actually a distortion of Christian faith. To clarify some potential confusion, I will discuss the papal endorsement of the just war and show that it cannot be equated with Christianity as a cause of violence.

This aspect of the *via empirica* must be interpreted as a piece in negative apologetics; it is concerned with responding to atheistic claims pronounced against Catholicism as a violent religion. Another task of negative apologetics is to expose the weaknesses within those criticisms. On the other hand, a work in positive apologetics would attempt to undercut the atheists' claims by overwhelming them with positive evidences showing the beneficial impact Christianity has had upon the world.

The New Atheists and Christian Absolutes

Different proponents of the new atheists propose different types of arguments. Sam Harris, for instance, claims that inter-religious warfare was much more prevalent in the pre-modern world than it is today. Given the fact that Christianity thrived in the pre-modern period, its anachronistic religious tenets help to explain why religiously related violence occurs today.⁶³⁵ Therefore it is likely that Christianity is responsible for inaugurating violence in today's world.

Harris's assertion is vague and imprecise for a variety of reasons. When I use the word "vague," I mean that it is extremely difficult to decide whether war is more of a "pre-modern" phenomena than a modern one. How, exactly, does Harris determine this? Does he compare the frequency of battles fought during these two time periods? Or does he calculate the intensity of the fighting? Or body count? The reason why this is

⁶³⁵ Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 2005), 236, 237.

important is that there are other historians of warfare who argue for the exact opposite conclusion. They contend that war is a peculiarly modern phenomena, not a pre-modern one. As James Turner Johnson suggests, “the ongoing civil strife in Northern Ireland aside, the last time wars were fought for religion in the West was during the century after the protestant Reformation.”⁶³⁶ Certainly, from the time of the 16th century onward, religion would only remain, in the words of David Martin, “one marker of national identity.”⁶³⁷ Indeed, many anthropologists now recognize that the idea that pre-modern religion is the cause of violence is often founded on unreliable, uncritical, or even nonexistent positive evidence.⁶³⁸

Harris also seems to beg the question with respect to the supernatural (i.e., he assumes that pre-moderns were superstitious). But if supernaturalism can be shown to be the superior worldview over naturalism, then Harris’s claim is severely undercut. In some respect, the modern worldview is no more “enlightened” than the pre-modern worldview. As Huston Smith has written, very few, if any, persons ascribe to either the modern or pre-modern worldview at the expense of the other; they inevitably hold on to elements from both.⁶³⁹ Modernists may know more about some things than pre-moderns (e.g, modern science and technology), but in other cases we are *less* perceptive than they were (e.g., pre-moderns had a healthier imagination than moderns); moderns may be enlightened over them in different ways, but pre-moderns may have been more subtle and perceptive in others. Thus, if God exists, then Harris’s argument loses its force.

⁶³⁶ James Turner Johnson, *The Holy War Idea in Western and Islamic Traditions* (University Park: Penn State University, 1997), 112.

⁶³⁷ David Martin, *Does Christianity Cause War?* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1997), 104.

⁶³⁸ Cf. E. Evans Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1965).

⁶³⁹ Huston Smith, *Why Religion Matters* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001), 33.

Still others claim that part of the reason why Christianity has lasted well into modernity is that it continues to meet the needs of humanity.⁶⁴⁰ Harris can give reasons for why he thinks Christianity is wrong, but he cannot deny that modern people continue to be drawn to its message. Thus critics who are condescending about Christianity today will have a negative estimation about understanding its past.

Closely related to Harris's objection is the idea that Christians believe in moral and doctrinal absolutes. As Richard Dawkins wrote, absolute truth predisposes Christians to engage in violence, and, to a more intense degree, war. When asked to explain his contempt for religion, Dawkins responded that it is a sure spawning ground for violence: "Certainly [belief in God] can be positively harmful in many ways", he replied, "obviously in causing wars, which has often enough in history . . . causing people to do ill to one another because they are so convinced that they know what is right. Because they feel it from inside—they've been told from within what is right—anything goes—you can kill people because you know that they're wrong."⁶⁴¹

Dawkins has a significant point here (as I will explain later on, a rigid understanding of absolute truth is a sure sign that Christianity is becoming corrupt). What he seems to forget is that absolute truth is undeniable, regardless of one's worldview. For example, he argues that Christian doctrines are, to paraphrase him, false,⁶⁴² and he also upholds the truth of atheism. But these are two absolute claims! Thus, if he is right about the absolutism of Christianity, then he is wrong about the

⁶⁴⁰ Rodney Stark, *Discovering God* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2007).

⁶⁴¹ Source unknown (per David Martin, this interview was taken from Dawkins' "conversation with Sue Lawley on 'Desert Island Discs' in spring 1995"). Taken from Martin, *Does Christianity Cause War?*, 24.

⁶⁴² Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 250, 253, 258, 307, 313, 318.

epistemic warrant of Christians who defend absolutes; and if he is wrong about absolutes, then he is wrong about the absolutism of Christianity. To put this in other terms, if inner-religious clashes between Christians causes violence because of doctrinal and moral differences, then wouldn't Dawkins' differences with Christians put him at risk in becoming violent as an advocate of atheism?

Epistemologically speaking, the issue is not whether Christians are setting themselves up to become violent in thinking they have the truth (metaphysics), but in how rigid they perceive (epistemology) it. Because truth is one (metaphysical), unity arises between people as they come to know (epistemology) it more clearly. Unity in the truth, however, does not automatically entail uniformity in the truth. This rationalistic view of absolutes can lead to intolerance and violence. But this is not how the Catholic Church understands truth. There is supposed to be a legitimate pluralism within the bounds of orthodox truth.⁶⁴³

Although Catholics can and must learn to be tolerant with what we think are erroneous beliefs in other world and life-views, we must strive to respect everyone's right to think and choose differently. This is completely in line with the ecumenical movement. This conviction can and must be upheld, especially in light of the fundamental Christian conviction that all people are created in the image of God. Indeed, disagreement can and must co-exist with respect. When I say "respect," I mean that Christians are in fact called to peacefully acknowledge that others can disagree with them without resorting to force in the process. To put this in more positive terms, the fact that we can agree to disagree about our fundamental beliefs can actually become an

⁶⁴³ Avery Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1985); Aidan Nichols, *The Shape of Catholic Theology* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1991), 263-356.

opportunity for us to keep our fundamental questions and interaction about God alive and even renewed. Despite our differences in a pluralistic society, Christians can contribute to promoting the common good with others who do not agree with them without advancing violence at the same time.

Many Christian theologians have stressed that all people can apprehend the absolute truth about God and humanity.⁶⁴⁴ But Catholic theology is a little bit more nuanced than this and holds that every person can see and articulate this absolute truth in different *ways*. The metaphysical truth is the same for all (God's existence, with Christ as the Savior), but the epistemological can be radically different for different individuals. This does not lead to outright pluralism (where the epistemological is exploited, and the metaphysical is abrogated to nothing), but to an inclusive faith that maintains the unique role of Jesus Christ.

In many cases the atheistic charge of absolutes is closely linked to biblical injunctions in the Old Testament. A widespread argument of the new atheists is that the God of the Old Testament once commanded the extermination of certain groups.⁶⁴⁵ For them the God of the Old Testament is a God of war. As new atheist Victor Stenger one put it, "The Old Testament is filled with atrocities committed in the name of God. These are rarely mentioned in Sunday school, but anyone can pick up a Bible and read them for herself."⁶⁴⁶

Instead of arguing on a literalistic point-counterpoint basis with the atheists, one must provide a more nuanced response. The Old Testament must be seen as a collection of individual books from different cultural traditions, written at different times. All of

⁶⁴⁴ See the chapter on scholastic apologetics and natural knowledge of God.

⁶⁴⁵ Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 31, 238, 242, 243.

⁶⁴⁶ Victor Stenger, *God: The Failed Hypothesis* (Amherst: Prometheus, 2008), 203-205.

these books shed light on how the nation of Israel perceived what they thought was God's providence for them at the time. Since Revelation continues to develop as time goes on, our understanding of it today should clarify the meaning of these older texts. Today some Christians interpret the Old Testament through the lens and prism of the life and teaching of Jesus (cf. Matt. 5:17, 18). Christians have always used a variety of methods of interpretation when viewing the Old Testament with that lens in focus.⁶⁴⁷ This is very important to keep in mind in responding to this atheistic argument. When the historical-critical method of interpretation becomes the sole method of interpretation, it is easy to infer that the God of the Old Testament is a violent God who has timelessly commanded his people to kill those who would oppose him.⁶⁴⁸

As such, a Catholic understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures should not only include the literal sense of interpretation, but also the spiritual sense. As Pope John Paul II declared, the Magisterium of the Catholic Church, in addressing biblical exegesis, "rejects a split between the human and divine, between scientific research and respect for the faith, between the literal sense and the spiritual sense."⁶⁴⁹ Later on in this document, he writes, "exegetes have to make use of the historical-critical method. They cannot, however, accord to it a sole validity. . . . Exegetes should also explain the Christological, canonical, and ecclesial meanings of the biblical texts."⁶⁵⁰ The Old Testament books are also shaped by the community and historical and social contexts

⁶⁴⁷ Cf. Paul Hanson, "War and Peace in the Hebrew Bible," *Interpretation*, 38.4, (1984): 344, 345.

⁶⁴⁸ For an excellent chapter on all this, see Paul N. Anderson, "Genocide or Jesus?: A God of Conquest or Pacifism?," from J. Harold Ellens, ed. *The Destructive Power of Religion* (Westport: Praeger, 2004), 31-52.

⁶⁴⁹ Pope John Paul II, "Address on the Interpretation of the Bible in the Church," (April 23, 1993), no. 6., in Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1993), 16.

⁶⁵⁰ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 106.

through which individuals engage, internalize, and act upon these text.⁶⁵¹ In order to understand them accurately today, one must interpret them within the community that was responsible for originally writing them down, including those communities that continue to pass them down today.

So although Catholics hold that all Scripture is inspired by God, this does not mean that everything reported in Scripture should be taken at literal face value (which is how a historical-critic will tend to view them).⁶⁵² For it is widely recognized that the books of the Old Testament are not mere historical reports, but are highly colored by theological motifs. This is another reason why historical-critical exegesis cannot be the sole means of interpretation. It will fail to do justice to the texts to understand them correctly. When many methods are used through the lens of Christ's life, the picture of God that emerges is not a God of war, but a merciful God who demands justice, urging his people to remain faithful to the covenant.

The New Atheists as Doctors of Modernity

Harkening back to Karl Marx's view of religion, Christopher Hitchens complains that belief in the afterlife predisposes believers to not care about what happens in this lifetime. The more and more believers project their cares onto the next lifetime, they less and less they will care about what happens in this lifetime. They will not care whether they die, or whether they die in battle or in suicide attacks. In many cases belief in the afterlife predisposes believers to become violent.

⁶⁵¹ D. Andrew Kille, "The Bible Made Me Do It: Text, Interpretation, and Violence," from J. Harold Ellens, ed. *The Destructive Power of Religion* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2004), 56.

⁶⁵² John J. Collins, "The Zeal of Phineas: The Bible and the Legitimation of Violence," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 122.1 (2003): 20, 21.

Now this is an understandable conclusion for Hitchens and others (like John Lennon, for instance, who sang “Imagine there’s no heaven” with a promise that this would leave us with “nothing to kill or die for”) to make if they deny the continuity between this lifetime and the next. It is also understandable if these atheists think that Catholicism teaches that all people will go to heaven. But in the Catholic view, there is a one-to-one correspondence between the person who dies and the person who rises. Christian theology has always maintained that hell is a real state of final existence.⁶⁵³

The individual fate of each individual person—whether it ends in the bliss of heaven or the justice of hell—is ultimately determined by the way in which we shape our characters *in this lifetime*. Because there is a heaven *and hell*, this invests every moral decision in our lifetime with eternal significance. Life is filled with meaning because good actions are worthy to perform in and of themselves. Immoral actions must always be avoided.

Because human life does not end at the grave in a Christian universe, all persons are held accountable for their actions during their earthly lives. In the end the scales of justice will finally be balanced, and righteousness will prevail over evil. Every evil will be transformed for the greater good. In turn every serious decision that is made by Christians in this lifetime *has eternal significance* because there is something to hope for in the end.⁶⁵⁴ Christians can make decisions that run highly against contrarian pressures in their lifetime and embrace acts of extreme self-sacrifice for the greater good. By no means does the acknowledgement of God’s existence entail heavenly reward and/or final justice. Christian belief can afford one that type of motivation.

⁶⁵³ Moreover, the Church has never officially pronounced that anyone is actually in hell.

⁶⁵⁴ *Gaudium et Spes*, N. 20, 21, 34, 39, 43.

Catapulted by the Paschal Mystery, the first Christians were led to care more about earthly life, including the goodness of creation itself.⁶⁵⁵ Belief in the incarnation demanded this kind of attitude. Again, God entered into creation and became *human*. Not caring about one's embodied life and the creation itself is therefore diametrically opposed to the very meaning of believing in the incarnation itself. At most, Hitchens argued against a false conception of what it means to be a Catholic/Christian. Like the other arguments surveyed here, Hitchens' argument is completely unsuccessful.

Celestial escape from worldly affairs is brought to the fore by Dawkins in Freudian terms. According to Richard Dawkins, Christianity is actually bad for people—it is a “kind of mental illness.”⁶⁵⁶ In this view, belief in God is a kind of mental virus that infects what is otherwise a healthy mind. The more and more people succumb to religion, the more they become inclined to do things normal people would not do. This includes include violent behaviors.⁶⁵⁷

Dawkins' argument is basically a newer version of Feuerbach, Marx, and Freud's projection theory against belief in God. In their view, God can be merely explained in terms of sociological, psychological, and/or anthropological categories of the mind. When individuals begin with this atheistic presupposition, the projection theorist has a strong point in arguing that faith leads people down the path of self-destructive behavior. But until good arguments are first given for atheism, the projection theorist simply begs

⁶⁵⁵ N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 582, 583. Cf. 603, 610.

⁶⁵⁶ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2006), p. 330; idem, *The God Delusion*, 186, 188.

⁶⁵⁷ Cf. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 167.

the entire question.⁶⁵⁸ Basically what the neo-atheist is saying is that because God does not exist, how could there be such a thing as religion or religiously related violence? But this starting point is the very thing that needs to be challenged. Arguments in favor of theism are often seen as cogent in contemporary theology and philosophy—arguments that are often unaddressed in the new atheist literature.

Similarly, the atheistic projection theorist seem to commit the genetic fallacy. That is to say, they confuse how one comes to believe in God with whether the belief in question is true.⁶⁵⁹ Certainly, the psychology of belief is not the same thing as the rationality of belief; how one comes to believe in God may not have anything to do with whether the belief in question is true.

Moreover, the idea that God is a projection of our minds to keep us safe from the unrelenting forces of nature and society is somewhat idiosyncratic. To be sure, the God of Christian tradition is merciful, but he is also seen as *retributive*. This kind of God makes it difficult to understand why anyone would want to project him. This is a point that even Dawkins concedes in his book on atheism.⁶⁶⁰ Christians might ask the atheists in response: is it really a bad thing to say that belief in God brings satisfaction and peace of mind to those who need it? All people need to be comforted with a variety of things—

⁶⁵⁸ Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 193, is very well aware of this problem. His response is that believers are also begging the question. But this is exactly where the philosophical arguments for God's existence are needed.

⁶⁵⁹ Conversely, it often shown that militant atheists usually come from families in which the father figure was either absent, indifferent, or abusive to them. Theists, on the other hand, usually come from families where the father figure played a more positive role in their life. See Paul C. Vitz, *The Faith of the Fatherless* (Dallas: Spence, 2000).

⁶⁶⁰ Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 168.

food, shelter, friendship, and camaraderie. All of these are real human needs. Perhaps there is a real human need for God.⁶⁶¹

So, it should be remembered that there is nothing wrong with coming to God for help in our time of need, but in Christian worship we also adore God for *who* he is. In Catholic theology, salvation becomes *more demanding* for anyone exposed to the Savior, *not easier* to attain.⁶⁶² In lieu of the last point, it must be admitted that believers do sometimes project things about an incomprehensible God. But some false projections do not entail that all beliefs about him are false.⁶⁶³ Growing in discipleship and knowing God is an ongoing, daunting process. Lastly, the atheists might also be confusing the Christian call to lead a simple lifestyle with psychological weakness.

On another front, the issue has very little to do with electro-chemical and neurobiological processes in the brain. It has everything to do with how the scientific evidence is interpreted.⁶⁶⁴ Some will interpret the evidence and argue that belief in God can be merely reduced to complex physical mechanisms. Others will argue that *all* human experience has, in fact, a neurobiological component to it. Seen in this way, brain processes are the proximate cause of how people experience God, but the ultimate cause is due to the extra-mental reality of God himself. Until Dawkins can explain why a

⁶⁶¹ For an account, see Peter Kreeft, *Heaven: The Heart's Deepest Longing*, exp. ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989).

⁶⁶² *Lumen Gentium*, 14.

⁶⁶³ Gregory R. Peterson, *Minding God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 186, 187.

⁶⁶⁴ See Dean Hamer, *The God Gene* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 16: "This is a book about why people believe, not whether those beliefs are true. Nonbelievers will probably argue that that finding a God gene proves there is no God—that religion is nothing more than a genetic program for self deception. Religious believers, on the other hand, can point to the existence of God as one more sign of the creator's ingenuity—a clever way to help us humans acknowledge and embrace his presence."

single layered explanation of the evidence should be preferred, this interpretation remains a valid one.⁶⁶⁵

In addition, there is a growing amount of well-established scientific evidence that indicates a direct causal link between religious commitment and well-being.⁶⁶⁶ To my knowledge, Dawkins is either completely unaware of these findings or chooses to ignore them. Dennett, it may be added, who is an avid reductionist in the biological sciences like Dawkins, admits that this conclusion about the relationship between religion and health is sound.⁶⁶⁷ In fact, he says, one of the advantages of religion in the long struggle of evolution was that it helped human beings to live in communities without fighting and killing one another!⁶⁶⁸

Christianity, Atheism, and the Testimony of History

The testimony of history clearly reveals that Christians have committed many heinous crimes. Whether it is the Crusades, the Inquisition, the fighting between Catholics and Protestants, the justification of slavery, the slaughter of those who refused to convert, or the fighting in Northern Ireland, history conclusively shows that Christianity is a violent religion. All of these episodes, according to Regina Schwartz, explain how “monotheism” has brought a “violent legacy” to the west.⁶⁶⁹

Now there is no question that many Christians have committed an incalculable amount of hate crimes. But the thing to keep in mind is that this objection must show

⁶⁶⁵ Cf. John F. Haught, *Is Nature Enough?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2006).

⁶⁶⁶ For two recent examples, see Harold G. Koenig and Harvey J. Cohen, *The Link Between Religion and Health: Psychoneuroimmunology and the Faith Factor* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2005); Kenneth I. Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping: Theory, Research, Practice* (New York: Guilford, 1997).

⁶⁶⁷ Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell* (New York: Viking, 2007), 55, 272-277. Cf. 190.

⁶⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 172. Cf. 179.

⁶⁶⁹ Regina Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1997).

that Christianity causes violence, not that it is correlated with it. With this extreme difficulty in mind, this “argument from historical observation” does not demonstrate that Christianity causes violence, but has more of a descriptive character to it, *exposing the very problem that needs to be addressed*.

Even though historians can give many examples showing where the faith has been correlated with violence, it is difficult to deny on those same grounds that Christianity has been associated with a tremendous amount of good.⁶⁷⁰ As Michael Shermer has admitted, “for every one of these grand tragedies there are ten thousand acts of personal kindness and social good that go unreported. . . . Religion, like all social institutions of such historical depth and cultural impact, cannot be reduced to an unambiguous evil.”⁶⁷¹ I have already discussed some of these positive changes above. All of the good and the bad must be weighed and assessed together, not just the bad track record that is associated with Christianity. But considering the bad over against the good is exactly what the atheists have done.

These examples of Christian violence indicate that we are dealing with highly ambiguous scenarios that are open to interpretation on a variety of levels. Given this ambiguity, it becomes difficult to demonstrate that Christianity was directly responsible for driving believers down the narrow path of committing such awful crimes. The causal factors involved with war, for instance, are usually explained in terms of social, political, and economic causes—not religious ones.⁶⁷²

⁶⁷⁰ Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts, and the End of Slavery* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2003); idem, *The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism and Western Success* (New York: Random House, 2005).

⁶⁷¹ Michael Shermer, *How We Believe*, (New York: Freeman, 2000), 71; cf. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 253.

⁶⁷² Cf. William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2009).

To make matters even more complicated, the problem of identifying the true causes of war and violence comes in the attempt to identify and explain what actually counts as good and bad. For example, many persons all over the world viewed Mother Theresa as doing much good for the destitute in the streets in India. Others saw her as having a bad social effect on the Indian political system. They believe that her resources could have been utilized for better reasons. So the problem of defining *what* is good and evil (which must be distinguished from the very fact of good and evil, which is universal) usually varies from one culture to the next. The point is that this often makes it difficult for anyone to identify that Christianity causes violent acts.

To bring this point home, this generalized “argument from historical observation” is no more effective than saying *atheism* causes violence. After all, some historians seem to think that atheist politicians such as Lenin admitted to using “protracted violence” to eliminate religion off the face of the earth.⁶⁷³ The same could be said with respect to *politics*. In Latin America, millions of people “disappeared” in the words of extreme right wing politicians and their militias. In Cambodia, Pol Pot was responsible for killing millions in the name of socialism. But surely it is safe to conclude that *politics* is not evil.⁶⁷⁴

The same could be said about *science*. Surely no atheist would claim that science is evil simply because some scientists were responsible for creating weapons to torture people—like napalm.⁶⁷⁵ The main point is that every single human institution can be

⁶⁷³ Alister McGrath and Joanna Collicut McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion?: Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine* (Downer’s Grove: Intervarsity, 2007), 77.

⁶⁷⁴ Keith Ward, *Is Religion Dangerous?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 44-49.

⁶⁷⁵ Steven Weinberg, *Dreams of a Final Theory: The Scientist’s Search for the Ultimate Laws of Nature*, (New York: Vintage, 1993), 259, recognizes, scientific atheism “has made its own contribution to the world’s sorrows,” but “where the authority of science has been invoked to justify horrors, it has been in terms of *perversions* of science.”

utilized for evil when it is abused. As Alister McGrath urges, “All ideals—divine, transcendent, human or invented—are capable of being abused. That’s just the way human nature is. And knowing this, we need to work out what to do about it rather than lashing out uncritically at religion.”⁶⁷⁶

Many of the examples that are often mentioned by atheists should be contextualized to get a better idea about the causal factors involved. In many cases, historians have shown that many traditional stereotypes about Christian violence is simply not as bad as commonly thought (e.g., the amount of people killed in the Spanish Inquisition or the amount of people killed in the witch hunts in Salem⁶⁷⁷).

Further, slavery is not commanded in the New Testament.⁶⁷⁸ Paul commanded *Christian slaves* to obey their masters simply because all Christians are called to service in whatever vocation they happen to be in. So, when Paul says “slaves, obey your masters” he is not commanding slavery, but that slaves must live out their calling within the context in which they find themselves.

Reductivism as a Catalyst for Religious Violence

One of the strengths of the new atheism is that they expose a correlation between Christianity and violence.⁶⁷⁹ No one should doubt the importance of exposing this problem. This ought to drive Christians to identify the root cause(s) of the violence performed in the name of Christ to correct these problems accordingly. We are still left

⁶⁷⁶ McGrath and McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion*, 81.

⁶⁷⁷ Henry Kamen, *The Spanish Inquisition: A Historical Revision* (New Haven: Yale University, 1997), 10, 17, 18, 30, 41, 59, 60, 305; Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God*, 200-291.

⁶⁷⁸ Roland Bainton, *Christian Attitudes Toward War and Peace* (New York: Abingdon, 1960), 54; Johnson, *A History of Christianity*, 437.

⁶⁷⁹ Cf. Merold Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith: The Religious Uses of Modern Atheism* (New York: Fordham University, 1998).

with having to explain why Christians become violent in the name of Christ. In order to accomplish this task, I will explain and describe the thought patterns and/or ideologies that influence believers to engage in these acts. When one or more of these patterns of thinking are in place, this can alert us of the seeds that can potentially sprout into violence. At the same time, we can look back in history and see that when Christians used force, these thought patterns were already operative and in place.

Well-meaning Christians who construe everything in terms of black and white about reality may unknowingly feed attitudes and actions to justify violence that is literally opposed to genuine Christian faith to begin with. The issue is not about renouncing the notion of absolutes (a metaphysical reality), but about a specific interpretation of them (a one-sided epistemology)—one in which truth demands uniform consent from everyone. In this rigid view of truth it becomes easy to view non-Catholics as outsiders, and, to a more extreme degree, as enemies who deserve punishment.⁶⁸⁰ As Charles Kimball writes: “When particular understandings become rigidly fixed, and uncritically appropriated as absolute truths, well-meaning people can and often do paint themselves into a corner from which they must assume a defensive or even offensive posture.”⁶⁸¹ The official Catholic position does not do away with absolutes, but allows for a variety of interpretations along an orthodox spectrum. Truth should lead to a symphony of voices in unity, not stagnant unison. Epistemological subjectivity is certainly compatible with metaphysical objectivity.

⁶⁸⁰ Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 330, is correct about the fact that rigid forms of absolutism can lead Christians into becoming violent. As he puts it, “If a man believes in a different god, or even if he uses a different ritual for worshipping the same god, blind faith can decree that he should die—on the cross, at the stake, skewered on a Crusader’s sword, shot in a Beirut street, or blown up in a bar in Belfast.” What Dawkins points out is that a rigid faith can lead one to brutal acts of violence. But this would obviously not include all forms of Christian faith.

⁶⁸¹ Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2002), 46. Cf. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 51, 251, 295.

Historically speaking, the rigid view of truth probably led the crusaders to see their Muslim opponents as disobedient to the gospel—simply because they were Muslims and not Christians. This led them to slaughter the Muslims by the thousands. Fundamentalist Christians in our own day have also fallen prey to this one-sided ideology in murdering doctors who performed abortions (e.g. the reverend Paul Hill). They claimed that their interpretation of the Bible was the *only* right one. According to Hill, whoever opposed his interpretation deserved to die.

Second, when Christians limit the freedom and intellectual engagement of faith, this can make them and others prone into taking directions that lead to violence in an uncritical fashion. These individuals think that they know what God wants for them and everyone else (put this together with epistemological absolutism, and the recipe for violence increases exponentially).

For example, it is a known fact that David Koresh and Jim Jones ordered the women in their groups to have sex with them. These women completely bypassed the voice of common sense and conscience and, in blind faith, did what they were told—all in the name of “faith.” “When people embrace this orientation, their brains often appear to stop working properly; they no longer rely on their judgment and common sense.”⁶⁸²

Catholic faith, on the other hand, affects the whole of human nature. It begins with the conviction of the mind based on adequate evidence, and culminates in good conduct. Despite what Dawkins asserts when he describes faith as “blind trust, in the absence of evidence, even in the teeth of evidence,”⁶⁸³ faith is all about critical and

⁶⁸² Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil*, 88.

⁶⁸³ Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 198. Cf. 330. In his words, faith ‘leads people to believe in whatever it is so strongly that in extreme cases they are prepared to kill and die for it without the need for

responsible thinking. The Catholic view of faith is not a leap into the dark; it is a rational step into the light, demanding responsible thinking (cf. Matt 10:16; Rom. 12:2; 1 Cor 14:20). Reasons can be given for faith. And no truth of reason will contradict a truth of faith.

Third, reductive interpretations of the Bible can induce believers to become violent. This violent approach usually occurs when the literalist method of historical-critical interpretation is used at the expense of other methods when looking at certain passages in the Bible that seem to suggest that God wants his people to fight and kill others.⁶⁸⁴ Many Christians have fallen prey to this bible-based fallacy. Without interpreting the Scriptures correctly, using a variety of methods, many Christians have irresponsibly used prooftexts in support of slavery, discrimination against women, racial minorities, homosexuals, and Jews. It has also led married couples to think that God was going to heal their children without using the necessary medicine (after all, they argued, God works miracles for those who have “enough faith”). It has also been used by Christians who sincerely believed that Mark’s Gospel sanctions the use of snake handling. Lopsided readings, therefore, can lead many uninformed interpreters into thinking that certain behaviors are fine without recognizing at the same time that these actions can lead to dire consequences.

Fourth, psychological debilitations make it easy to perceive one’s situation as bleak, catapulting them down the path of destructive behavior. When believers are in need of psychological help, it becomes easy for them to say or do things in the name of the Savior that they wouldn’t ordinarily do. Likewise, when certain ends are heightened

further justification’. Dawkins is correct to maintain that those Christians who are ‘blind in their obedience’ can lead to violence, but this is a human corruption of Christian faith.

⁶⁸⁴ Ward, *Is Religion Dangerous?*, 36-38.

at the exclusion of others, this can lead Christians into becoming violent toward those who get in the way of them being able to fulfill these obligations.⁶⁸⁵ Kimball suggests:

In authentic, healthy religion the end and the means to that end are always connected. But it is often easy for religious people to lose sight of the ultimate goal and focus instead on one component of religion. When a key feature of religion is elevated and in effect becomes an end, some people within the religion become consumed with protecting or achieving that end. In such cases, that component of religion functions like an absolute truth claim, and zealous believers become blind in their single minded defense of it. As we will see, this corruption takes many forms, but the pattern is unmistakable. The end goal of protecting or defending a key component of religion is often used to justify any means necessary.⁶⁸⁶

Sometimes this mentality manifests itself in trying to defend sacred spaces, or in maintaining religious life or a group identity. In history we see the concept of the end justifying any means in Catholics who defended their group identity so intensely that they ended up demonizing others in the process—against Jews, women, and other races and classes. Another example is when certain bishops in the Catholic Church hid and shifted priests from parish to parish who were pedophiles. Of course, the moral end of trying to maintain the Church’s reputation ended up superceding the moral end of simply being honest. To conclude, when Christians consider certain goals sacrosanct and above all else, it is easy for them to do whatever it takes to make sure these ends are met—even if it takes violent action to do so.

Fifth, Christians have often used religious rhetoric to cover up their secular and/or political purposes to engage in war.⁶⁸⁷ As Keith Ward rightly observes: “It is when religious institutions are blended with political institutions that religion can be enlisted in

⁶⁸⁵ Again, a point made explicit by Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 330, 331; Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 280, 281.

⁶⁸⁶ Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil*, 129.

⁶⁸⁷ Cf. Robert A. Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Random House, 2005); Diego Gambetta, ed. *Making Sense of Suicide Missions* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2005).

the use of force—and even then it is just one identifying marker among others.’⁶⁸⁸ The issue of political power was at least one of the markers in the case of the crusades. The concern for spreading Christianity may have played some part in advancing these terrible battles by stroking them with religious overtones, but the fundamental motivating factor was the hunger for power and wealth.⁶⁸⁹

The wars of religion (between Catholics and Protestants) are another perfect example when political leaders used religious categories to advance their cause, but actually their decisions were shaped more by geo-political and economic factors. As James Turner Johnson argued, a common theme in Europe during the time of the thirty years war was “a link between the religious reformers and forces seeking more local autonomy. The result was what we could today recognize as an ideological use of religion to bolster claims essentially political and economic in nature.”⁶⁹⁰

Here I have identified the various thought patterns that dispose Christians⁶⁹¹ to engage in brutally violent acts. Reductionism pervades their mindset. By recognizing these warning signs and remaining close to the true source of faith (i.e., the God of Jesus Christ), Catholic Christians can begin to root out the causes of violence that is performed in the name of faith before it actually happens.

Some critics will undoubtedly argue that Christians can be just as vicious as the worst unbelievers. This would also tell against God’s work in the Church (thus calling the ecclesial attribute of holiness into serious question). But at most this would only show how much worse true Christians would be without their faith. This allegation is not

⁶⁸⁸ Ward, *Is Religion Dangerous?*, 79.

⁶⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 68, 69.

⁶⁹⁰ Johnson, *The Holy War Idea in Western and Islamic Traditions*, 112.

⁶⁹¹ One might argue that nominal believers are much more prone to be intolerant and divisive than are committed believers.

a definitive refutation of the holiness of the Church. For we should expect this holy alteration from unbelief to belief to effect changes in habits of action. But we should not expect these changes to be radical in new believers who already possess a significant amount of virtue before embracing Christian faith (these individuals are not holy as such, but are, more or less, more disposed to accepting Christ). The change is relative, depending upon the person (and continues to be relative within the believing community).

As such, sin is not a genuine effect of believing in Christ, but the result of having a reductive understanding of believing in him (sometimes this reductionism is so extreme that it can only be equated with unbelief⁶⁹²). The Church includes all that is holy, even that which is holy in her sinful members. But she excludes whatever is impure—even that which is unholy in her morally holy members. As Avery Dulles acknowledges: “Sin, therefore, cannot be attributed to the church when considered in its formal principles, but only when considered materially, in its guilty members. They exhibit not the true nature but the ‘un-nature’ of the church. Nevertheless it is true that, . . . In all its historical forms the true nature of the Church is accompanied, like a dark shadow by its ‘un-nature;’ the two are inseparable.”⁶⁹³ Again, critics must be able to demonstrate that Christianity is responsible for causing sin, not that violence is merely correlated with it.

When War is Justified in Christianity

Ever since the time of Augustine and Ambrose Christians have developed the “just war theory.” Just war theorists recognize that if no one can figure out how to

⁶⁹² *Lumen Gentium*, 14.

⁶⁹³ Avery Dulles, “The Church as ‘One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic’,” *Evangelical Review of Theology*, 23.1 (1999): 21.

peacefully resolve a major dispute first, and that war must be waged to overcome unjustifiable evil (like killing innocent civilians), then it can be fought. War can be waged only to lessen an evil that would have been worse had the war not been fought at all. Just war thinkers also contend that all means of peaceful resolution must be exhausted before resorting to physical force. Thus there is a strong presumption against going to war to begin with.

Just war theorists also recognize that when war is permitted, it is based on the sad reality that even though the Kingdom of God has broken into our midst, this does not mean it is completely here. We must wait for the coming of the fullness of the Kingdom. Christians believe that all people are created in the image of God, and that we live in a fallen world. With these two doctrines in mind, it is possible that a war can be fought. The presumption of peace in just war thinking has also led its theorists to formulate strategies to prevent war before it happens (interestingly, this presumption for the peaceful means of resolution flows from the teachings of the New Testament, not the criteria of the *ius ad bellum* which was later developed by Christian thinkers⁶⁹⁴). This has flowed from later trajectories in just war thinking as well.⁶⁹⁵ Just war theorists have also formulated a standard ethical set of criteria that must be followed at all costs as the just war is being fought. These criteria are known as the *ius ad bello*.

The important point to keep in mind is that the beginning point in Christian just war thinking is nonviolent. Real Christian faith, which finds its source in a God-man who would rather die at the hands of his adversaries rather than retaliate with force, can allow for “just wars” under certain circumstances. This does not mean that Christian

⁶⁹⁴ John Ferguson, *War and Peace in the World's Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1978), 111.

⁶⁹⁵ Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Dangerous*, 182-185.

faith has caused the war. Only when these attempts at nonviolent action have failed to protect the innocent against injustice can legitimate political authorities use limited force as a last resort as a means of self-defense to rescue the innocent in establishing justice. “The Christian acceptance of warfare was always somewhat conditional,” observes James Turner Johnson. “The use of force was justified only if it was undertaken against evil, and the soldier was enjoined to hate the sin against which he was fighting the sinner.”⁶⁹⁶ This beginning point pervades an authentically Christian mindset.

Conclusion

What constitutes a Christian believer is the divine life that has been imparted to her. The violence that believers commit is not due to the fundamental teachings of Christ, but to sinful believers who are in continuous need of God’s saving grace. Francis Sullivan put it this way, “to put it more acutely, the mystery is that the church is the people of God which, as consisting of real *people*, is inevitably marked by sin, but, as people of *God*, cannot fail to be holy.”⁶⁹⁷

All Christians have either knowingly or unknowingly allowed certain ideologies such as oppressive political, economic, and psychological forces to control their religious thinking and/or choices. So long as Christ is followed by sinful persons, the faith inspired by Christ will be ‘corrupted’ to some extent. Believers are not the only ones to share the burden of sin. But true believers will always partake against the struggle to fight against sin. And this is precisely the reason why God took on flesh and came into our world—to redeem us from violence (Luke 24:34). And this is precisely the reason

⁶⁹⁶ Johnson, *The Holy War Idea in Western and Islamic Traditions*, 111, 112.

⁶⁹⁷ Francis Sullivan, *The Church We Believe In: One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic* (Mahwah: Paulist, 1988), 67.

why God continues to renew Christians in the Spirit who have yet to reach the fullness of the Kingdom.

REDEFINING APOLOGETICS

My proposal that a “traditional apologetics” might find a place in a postconciliar Catholicism will be welcomed by some and deplored by others. What are some of the positive features of this dissertation? In the first half of this chapter I will point out the positive contributions my dissertation makes; in the second half I will point out some shortcomings and where further work needs to be done.

A Positive Evaluation of the Dissertation

There are at least ten positive aspects of this dissertation. Let me briefly mention them here. Each of the following points will be discussed in more detail in this section.

(1) Apologetics will always have a role to play in the church, no matter whether the church is “postconciliar” or not. There will always be objections and concerns that prevent individuals from taking the claims of the church seriously. This fundamental contention of the universal applicability of apologetics should be clear to all readers. Whether one chooses to use the word “apologetics” or not, the task of defending and explaining the central truths of the faith will remain an ongoing struggle in the life of faith. I have given my “apologetic for apologetics” in the introductory chapter of this dissertation. This dissertation also helps to fill in a gap left unaddressed by many theological publications in the postconciliar period. High ranking officials of the Church have been calling for projects like this.⁶⁹⁸ Indeed, this dissertation is consistent with Scripture, the history of Catholic thought, and Magisterial teaching.

⁶⁹⁸http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20100429_levada-new-apologetics_en.html

(2) The second positive feature of the dissertation is that it helps reintroduce the task of probing some of the deepest questions that anyone can ask about Christianity. Undoubtedly the contents of this dissertation will resonate with Christians and skeptics who are able to think through the ramifications of Christianity as a religion that makes truth claims (it will especially resonate with college age students and other intellectually engaged laymen and women). There aren't too many theological works that address the kinds of questions that I have written about in this dissertation.

As an example I addressed the existence of historical credibility of Jesus' resurrection from the dead from an evidential point of view. One of the most significant challenges that Christians must face has to do with the miraculous origins of Christianity. Is Jesus merely a great but dead person, or is he a risen living person and presence? Christians claim that the crucified Jesus had been raised from the dead and remains powerfully present in the world—a claim that deserves serious attention from any thoughtful person. These kinds of questions are perennial ones.

(3) Third, unlike many older approaches to apologetics, which focused almost exclusively on the deliverances of reason (scholastic apologetics), I have stressed the importance of human experience (experiential apologetics), the meaning of doctrine (theological apologetics), and the tentative nature of evidence (evidentialism). My dissertation therefore emphasizes the apologetic enterprise without necessarily giving the negative impression of “combativeness” which typically characterized preconciliar approaches to Catholic defense (approaches which focused almost exclusively on reasoned approaches to defending Christianity). The models approach to apologetics is therefore sensitive to the individual avenues through which people come to faith.

Older approaches were heavily concerned with gradually building a case for faith (beginning with God, and then arguing for Christ and the Church, in that order). Thus the dissertation recognizes the contextual nature of the different avenues of coming to faith. My approach does not relegate apologetics to reasoned defenses alone. Instead this dissertation is sensitive to the different contexts in which the arguments are made. One might become convinced of the truth of Christianity because they analyzed the arguments for God's existence before they sit down to look at the evidence for his divinity. In my dissertation I acknowledge this approach (I realize that scholastic and evidential apologetics are complementary, with the former having more foundational importance), but also realize that other means of persuasion can be given in any order depending on how the discussion between Catholics and their interlocutors proceeds.

Likewise, I recognize that apologetics cannot be relegated to the sphere of reason before one comes to faith). Though I do not say it often in this dissertation, I recognize that apologetics is not always needed in the dialogue before one comes to greater experiences of faith. Hence I realize the limitations of traditional forms of apologetics in a postconciliar church, but still believe in the validity of whatever was good in those approaches.

(4) In the preconciliar manuals of apologetics, there was an emphasis on being able to "prove Christianity."⁶⁹⁹ Yet nowhere do I claim to prove Christianity in this dissertation. At the very most I claim that aspects of the Christian faith are the most

⁶⁹⁹ See, e.g., the various citations of Ludwig Ott in *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*

reasonable position to take given the evidence we have to work with.⁷⁰⁰ As I said in the chapter on postmodernism:

Christian doctrine can be seen as an explanatory hypothesis that accounts for a wide variety of features, including history, the cosmos, and the nature of humanity. We would still be within our epistemic rights to argue that the Catholic worldview can outstrip rival hypotheses because of its explanatory power, comprehensiveness, plausibility, logical consistency, livability, and whether competing hypotheses are ad hoc, and so forth. Christian scholars are now beginning to utilize the newer approach to apologetics in contrast to the evidentialist challenge. As a reaction to modernism, postmodernism accords with the provisional nature of knowledge advanced by fallibilism. John Polkinghorne holds that believers can retain their presuppositions when comparing and contrasting their views with other competing claims. The final assessment is predicated on whose *Weltanschauung* resonates and makes the most sense out of the agreed upon evidence.

I still maintain the best features of the apologetic manuals, but add additional nuances to them by addressing the concerns that theologians and apologists must work with in a newer intellectual climate. Simply because the traditional apologetic approaches were faulty does not mean that everything in them should be discarded in a postconciliar church.

(5) Another salient problem with many preconciliar works of apologetics is that they were based on older scholarship and evidential findings. In this way they were the product of their time. My approach, however, uses the most up-to-date scholarship in making a case for Christian faith. For instance in the chapter on the resurrection I said:

Undoubtedly the newest quest for the historical Jesus has ushered in a strong wave of apologetic writings defending the historicity of Jesus' resurrection. The main evidence considered usually consists of the post-mortem appearances, the empty tomb, and the origin of the earliest disciples' belief in the Risen Christ, along with earliest Christians' worship practices despite their every predisposition to the contrary. Apologist Gary Habermas has developed what is called the "minimal facts approach" to defending the resurrection. According to him there are twelve widely accepted facts that have been furnished by the majority of New Testament scholars.

One will notice that in older, preconciliar approaches to apologetics that the historical critical method of Scripture scholarship was literally absent. There was a lack of

⁷⁰⁰ It is also true that I say that God's existence can be proven, but only in the non-mathematical sense of the word.

understanding the historical critical method and what could be deduced (or responsibly inferred) about Christian origins. Yet in my approach the most up to date sociological and historical works were appealed to in the case for the resurrection and the positive influence of Christianity upon the world.

(6) The older style of apologetics seemed to rely on an overly propositional understanding of doctrine. Here I emphasized that although God's revelation to humanity is beyond propositions, this would not mean that we are to renounce the propositional. In this way my approach is consistent with traditional Catholic apologetics (which was almost exclusively propositional), but at least acknowledges that God's revelation is beyond propositions. Gaillardetz says:

the Second Vatican Council presented divine revelation as nothing less than the self-communication of God. It taught that divine revelation takes its primary form not as information, facts or even doctrines, but as a person, Jesus Christ. Vatican II taught that revelation, in its primary mode, is not the transmission of information but the sharing of divine life. God addresses us as friends and invites us into relationship (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, No. 2).⁷⁰¹

My concern to maintain the propositional is due to the fact that apologetics is, in many cases, concerned to reason with those who do not share our faith. The common ground that is needed for effective dialogue must be situated within a context that believers and unbelievers can both understand.

(7) Another weakness of the older style of apologetics is that it was triumphalistic. Now my dissertation is somewhat continuous with the importance of recognizing that truth is better than error (necessarily speaking, beliefs are true and others are false or partially true), but recognizes the importance that each person in the dialogue is to be equally respected no matter what one believes. I want to emphasize that truth is not equated with error (thus the truth certainly does "triumph" over error), but that love is to

⁷⁰¹ Richard Gaillardetz, "Do We Need a New(er) Apologetics?", online article in *America*.

be given to all. The more one loves, the more one is called to speak and defend what is true. Though love is always emphasized, one must speak and explain Catholic truth when the circumstances allow for it. Triumphalism is, therefore, to be distinguished from the triumph of Truth (cf. John 16:30-33). My chapter on postmodernism and rational apologetics exploits this distinction.

(8) Likewise, another weakness of many preconiliar apologetics works is that they often treated Catholicism as if all doctrines and practices of the faith were equally true. But, as Vatican II acknowledges, there is a legitimate hierarchy of truths. Because of the highly nuanced situation in Catholic theology today, I have chosen to focus on some of the foundational articles of the faith that nearly all Christians can agree with. My dissertation is highly sensitive to a broadly ecumenical era. There is nothing in this dissertation that specifically addresses why one should embrace Catholicism over Protestantism, for example.

(9) Still another weakness of older works in Catholic apologetics is that they too easily envisioned the Catholic faith as an unfailing entity that embodied the marks of holiness without fail at all times and places. In this dissertation I somewhat continued this tradition in the sense that I believe that the church should still be described as holy. However, I also recognize that it is accompanied by sin. I specifically addressed this issue in the last chapter on the *via empirica*. Not only did that chapter address the good which Christianity has in fact brought to the world, but any adequate apologetic needs to address the unholy features which have accompanied the church's existence in the world. In this way my dissertation was positively and negatively apologetical.

(10) Another positive strength of my dissertation is that it is passionate about the

subjects discussed. Any adequate apologetic work should be seriously concerned about the subject at hand, and I hope that the readers will agree with me that my dissertation has taken some of the most salient challenges to Christian faith seriously and with passion. Challenges from the “other side” are presented and addressed, not just positive arguments in behalf of the Christian Catholic view.

A Negative Evaluation of the Dissertation

Here I want to point out some of my own concerns with the dissertation. These are negative evaluations of the project. Each of the following points will be discussed in paragraphs below.

(1) First, I began the dissertation by arguing that the Second Vatican Council indicates that there are four distinct models of apologetics. Those four models carve out space which needs to be filled in with examples of apologetic challenges. Those test cases were arbitrarily chosen by me. But other examples could have been used. The use of reason (scholastic), experience (experientialism), evidence (evidentialism) and the meaning of doctrine (theological apologetics), thus provide a framework that could have included other test cases as well.

One could think of many other apologetic challenges that fall under the broad outline of the models approach to conciliar apologetics, including debates surrounding the celibacy of the priesthood and the sacraments, and other challenges related to bioethics. One could also refer to liberation movements as apologetical in their own right as well. Likewise, although I used categorized the

issue of God's existence under a scholastic approach to God's existence, it could have fallen under another apologetic model, such as experientialism. The point is that some sort of test case had to fall under each model as pronounced by the council.

(2) The second problem is that Catholicism can mean different things to different people. As a result, how does the apologist know what to defend unless we understand what Catholicism is, given the form it takes in different cultural contexts? As I said in the chapter on postmodernism, the very *fact* of truth must be distinguished from *what* is true. The very fact there is a truth is easier to defend than knowing what should be considered true.

The apologist can convincingly argue for the fact of truth (to deny that there is a truth is self-defeating and therefore impossible to evade). But when it comes to defending what is true, we have no choice but to begin with the tenets of faith. The problem becomes even difficult when one realizes that Catholicism itself can look very different in different contexts.

Let me say from the outset that this problem is one of the reasons why I have focused on some of the fundamental truths of the Catholic faith as test cases, not on secondary doctrines in the hierarchy of truths (say, whether priests should be celibate, whether Thomism constitutes the norm for Catholic theology, or whether Catholics can vote for candidates who are not pro-life). The apologist's reasons for defending one view against another in these debates are conditioned by factors that are not easily discernible or decisive as the reasons for Thomistic

proofs for the existence of God and the credibility of Christ' resurrection (in light of the newest quest for the historical Jesus).

Therefore, I hope the reader will recognize that my dissertation is not intended to be an exhaustive treatment of postconciliar apologetics (including all the topics that might be covered), but is deliberately intended to lay out the Council's vision of apologetics, using certain test cases which have been linked together around a fundamental theme (basic Christian faith) for a certain kind of reader (perhaps an atheist or an agonistic living in North America or Europe).

(3) This dissertation is heavily concerned with reason in matters of faith, even if those reasons are shaped in different ways (philosophical reason, historical reason, and sociological reasons). At one point I mentioned that the phenomenological encounter with holiness is important for apologetic purposes, but since it has already been discussed in another dissertation, which later became a published book,⁷⁰² I did need not feel the need to write about it.

Apologetics should be theoretical. Theoretical apologetics should be (A) *positive*, providing positive reasons for faith; and (B) *negative*, deflecting reasons against the faith, and showing where those alternative perspectives are shortsighted or even mistaken. My dissertation admittedly concentrates on theoretical apologetics, even though the reasons in question are shaped by different disciplines (philosophy, history and sociology) for different audiences. However, I do not want the reader to overlook the fact that praxis itself can serve

⁷⁰² Victoria S. Harrison, *The Apologetic Value of Human Holiness: Von Balthasar's Christocentric Philosophical Anthropology* (New York: Springer, 2000).

as a motive of credibility. My dissertation gives “lip service” this kind of apologetic, and so it could be developed at length in another work.

Practical apologetics can be characterized in the following way. First of all it is *contextual*. Here one is reminded of the different concerns of different people. Admittedly, the proofs for the existence of God might not have much resonance with people who don’t think in philosophical terms, but are more concerned about lived praxis. Christians who help the poor give an excellent witness to the Christian faith. The second characteristic of practical apologetics is that it must be *humble*. I maintain that the ultimate apologetic is how one lives their Christian life in the face of unbelief.

(4) The fourth model of the Council might be called “theological apologetics.” Good theology is always necessary for the purposes of credibility. A perfect example of this is when students reject Christian truth on the basis of caricatures which simply cannot be sustained theologically. I immediately think of the facetious objections some of my students have mentioned here at St. Joseph’s University. “How about evolution vs. creation, Mr. S? We now know that evolution is true; therefore Christianity has been proven false.” Well, that’s a false dichotomy to begin with! Another one is the longstanding belief that Christianity is the one true religion. When this well established position of Catholic theology is mentioned, many outsiders or skeptics think that this view entails that Catholics must believe all “outsiders” are going to hell. Good theology has an apologetic effect in the sense that it undercuts objections before skeptics can even present their challenges to him or her. Respectable Catholic

theology recognizes that the opening chapters of Genesis are not to be taken as a record of scientific facts, and that there is nothing wrong with positing Christian uniqueness and outsider salvation at the same time. My dissertation has tried to nuance certain theological beliefs in several ways, but the theological model of apologetics is a unique model that needs to be developed.

Though many theologians do not consider themselves as apologists, Catholic theologians are concerned about the importance of accurately describing Catholic beliefs and practices. Here the theologian can help the apologist in numerous ways, for why defend something if it's not even worth defending? In other words, if what we believe is immune from the straw man attacks of skeptics, then there is nothing for the apologist to worry about.

(5) The fifth and final point is that a postconciliar apologetics needs to be defined in comparison to other fields of theology. Defining what is meant by apologetics may help readers to interpret apologetic texts more accurately. For instance, in the Catholic Church we know there is tension between dialogue and proclamation. The principles which govern dialogue and the principles which govern proclamation are very different. On the one hand, the believer is within his or her rights to engage in evangelization and apologetics when the circumstances allow for it. On the other hand, that same believer can and must engage in interreligious dialogue and ecumenism when different circumstances arise. Dialogue is never about converting one's dialogue partner. So, one might conclude that dialogue (as expressed in interreligious dialogue and/or ecumenism) and proclamation (as expressed by evangelization and apologetics) have an analogous relationship in the life of an individual Catholic. These two paradigms (dialogue and

proclamation) are not antagonistic to one another, but epitomize the analogical thinking of a mature believer who knows when to engage in one and not the other.

The tension between proclamation and dialogue is fierce and is sometimes played out between “conservatives” and “liberals” in a postconciliar Catholic Church. Nonetheless, the distinctions between these two paradigms must be kept in delicate balance and individually pursued when necessary. Thus the definition of apologetics could be developed in the dissertation.

CONCLUSION

This discussion of postconciliar apologetics rests upon the teaching of Vatican II. There the bishops proclaimed the importance of a multifaceted approach to defending Christianity. One must also be aware of the context to make the Gospel credible. This apologetical approach is directed toward our fellow brethren, and to those individuals who are formally outside the Church.

After outlining the conciliar vision of apologetics, I started the next chapter of the dissertation by defending a primitive correspondence theory of truth. Christianity cannot be considered true by anyone unless the very fact that there is a truth can be first established. The importance of first principles (i.e., the law of non-contradiction, the law of the excluded middle, etc.) cannot be naively brushed aside as merely historically conditioned principles. The very statement that first principles are historically conditioned confuses epistemology and metaphysics. How we understand (epistemology) those principles is different from one person to the next. And the statement itself assumes the permanency of first principles, excluding its contrary denial.

Moreover, the universally binding nature of first principles enables the project of natural theology to get off the ground. So long as first principles are true, then we can make sense of the bishops' claim that one can know that God exists apart from the influence of special revelation. This rational approach to defending the faith is called scholastic apologetics. In this part of the dissertation I briefly discussed the Church's teaching about God's existence and highlighted the atheistic trends against the *intellectus essentiae* argument for God and found all of them wanting.

The success of this approach provides a philosophical framework enabling one to make sense of historical or scientific evidence. Indeed, as presuppositionalists have stressed to theologians, our background beliefs are necessary for understanding the nature of evidence and ascertaining what explanation might best account for it. As I said in the chapter on the historical credibility of the resurrection, “if a naturalistic explanation does not seem to account for the facts because the evidence is pulling in a direction which strongly suggests that a miracle has happened, and if the context in which the event is thought to have occurred is religiously charged, then it would be feasible for *the historian who [previously] believes in a personal God who will reveal himself in history* to conclude that a miracle has happened.” Indeed, without this presupposition, it would become impossible to favorably interpret the evidence in support of the resurrection.

Given the truth of God’s existence and the resurrection of Christ, one inevitably wonders what difference these “facts” in the past might have made upon the world. For it is easy to ask: “So what? Even if a personal God existed, and even if Christ was raised from the dead, what bearing does this have *on me?*” This is precisely where the experiential approach is necessary.

An experience with the true, good and the beautiful surely complements a rational defense of the Christian faith. In the next chapter I did not focus much attention on the phenomenological approach to human holiness as much as I concentrated on the empirical traces left by those individuals who have been changed by their living experience with Christ in the Church. Such an endeavor (i.e., a phenomenological one) would have been futile, if not self-defeating (because I would have to give *reasons* explaining the very nature and meaning of the encounter itself). So, it is true that without

faith one cannot perceive the holiness of the Church, but reason can legitimately apprehend the changes that Christians cultures have left upon those cultures it has infiltrated.

Moreover, the phenomenological encounter with holiness is fideistic at heart and is in need of the rational approach (evidentialism, scholasticism). As I said in this dissertation: “Experiences are never self-authenticating, and they must be interpreted through some other philosophical means. Experiences are often unverifiable and must be taken on faith alone by outsiders. In this way, the hardheaded skeptic is unlikely to be persuaded by hearing the testimony of believers and how they came to believe in Christianity. Many skeptics will quickly dismiss the warm experience of the Church by dismissing them with naturalistic explanations. Lastly, radical proponents of experientialism often overlook the primary sources of Christian theology (e.g., Scripture and Tradition) for the sake of their unique experiences.”

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