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HUMBLE CONFIDENCE

A Model for Interfaith Apologetics

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APOLOGETIC DIALOGUE IN A MULTICULTURAL WORLD

Christians engage in dialogue with their religious and nonreligious neighbors for a variety of reasons: simply in order to get to know them better; in order to draw from their wisdom, which they have acquired in the course of their lives; sometimes in order to work out how to live together in a time of tensions between ethnic and religious communities; or in order to discuss projects of joint interest for the common good.[1] One of the principal reasons for engaging in such attentive dialogue is the desire to share our faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, in whom we find the fullness of life, in the hope they will discover this precious gift for themselves. In this first chapter, we will consider the place of apologetic witness in this dialogue and why this is the case. This will also provide us with the central elements for a definition of apologetics. Such a definition will need to be open enough to allow us to develop forms of apologetic witness and dialogue that do justice to the nature of the message of Christ crucified, a message that is both foolishness and wisdom. These forms are holistic in that they address the entire person, and are sensitive to the great variety of people and contexts we encounter.

1.1 The Multifaceted Nature of Conversion and Witness

When we reflect on the role of apologetic witness in sharing the good news of Jesus Christ, we need to take into account that a broad range of factors play a role when people from different religious or ideological backgrounds come to faith—not just in how we imagine that they should come to faith, but in how

[1]Parts of this chapter have been published before in Benno van den Toren, "Why Inter-religious Dialogue Needs Apologetics: Intrinsic to Bearing Witness to Christ Is Making Truth Claims," *IFES World & World*, 33, no. 4 (2017): 19-26, https://ifesworld.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/IFES-Word-World-Issue-4-You-will-be-my-witnesses.pdf.

people actually do come to faith.[2] Rahil Patel, for example, born in a Hindu family in East Africa, became a leading figure in the European branch of a worldwide Gujarati Hindu movement. He tells his story about how he left all to become a swami, how he was gradually dissatisfied with the movement, particularly with the lack of room to ask critical questions and with the impossibility to find the spiritual freedom and fulfillment their guru promises. The decisive event that brought him to faith in Christ after having left and being cut off from his former spiritual home was an overwhelming experience of the presence and love of God in Christian worship.[3] In other conversion stories, other factors take the lead. Sometimes, the welcome and care provided by the Christian community played a major role, as in the case of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Steven Masood.[4] The Chinese Christian artist He Qi shared in a personal testimony to us that a major factor contributing to his conversion was him secretly copying a picture of a mother and child by the Italian Renaissance painter Raphael during the Cultural Revolution. Only much later, he discovered that it was a picture of Mary and Jesus. This painting really was an icon to him in the sense that it mediated a peace and divine presence that guided him on his way to faith.

These stories should not merely be read on a human level, but point to the importance of bringing God into the picture, to better understand such conversion stories. Sometimes this is very explicit, as when Muslims testify to appearances of Christ. There are other stories of conversion instigated by the experience of healing and deliverance through the power of the Holy Spirit, as testified in Buddhist communities in Sri Lanka. God can equally show God's presence in the ordinary, as witnessed in the conversion story of the Oxford zoologist Andy Gosler. Andy came to Christ from a secular background and met God through apparently "coincidental" encounters, events, and receiving the right messages at the right time.[5] God often works indirectly, through events, experiences, people, and communities. This is why the recognition of the decisive role of the Holy Spirit in the conversion process does not make consideration of other more human factors redundant.

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[2]Cf. Hendrik Kraemer, *Why Christianity of All Religions?*, trans. Hubert Hoskins (London: Lutterworth, 1962), 100.

[3]Rahil Patel, *Found by Love: A Hindu Priest Encounters Jesus Christ* (Watford, UK: Instant Apostle, 2016), 194-95.

[4]Steven Masood, *Into the Light: A Young Muslim's Search for Truth* (Carlisle, UK: OM, 1986), 58.

[5]Andrew G. Gosler, "Surprise and the Value of Life," in *Real Scientists, Real Faith*, ed. R. J. Berry (Oxford: Monarch, 2009), 173-89.

Among these different factors, an intellectual search for truth may also play a crucial role. Masood tells the story of how the Qur'an itself motivates him to search for the truth, but how deeply dissatisfied he becomes when his own religious community repeatedly asks him to blindly accept the traditions of the community and discourages an open quest for truth.[6] The study by Jean-Marie Gaudeul—stories of Muslims converting to Christ—points out that this is not a one-off, but that the discovery of the reasonableness and truthfulness of the Christian faith is one of the five recurring motives Gaudeul detects in such stories.[7] Philosopher of religion Anthony Flew was a major atheist voice in his field but reviewed his position well after his retirement, because the intricacy of the DNA molecule since discovered and the fine-tuning of the universe convinced him that belief in God is more rational than atheism.[8]

Conversion processes are, of course, often multilayered. Different factors and processes are intertwined. It may be sudden or gradual, but always concerns a change of worldview, of our will, of our values, and of what we desire most. It may be both triggered and hampered by social relationships. In many stories, the search for truth may not be the prime trigger of conversion but still plays an important role. As the conversion stories of Patel, Masood, Gosler, and others show, experiences of divine encounter, of healing, and of a welcoming community gain importance because of growing doubts about existing convictions and inklings that Christ may carry a deep truth and realism not found elsewhere. Witness to other religious communities should therefore be as holistic and multilayered as conversion is. In the remainder of this chapter, we will explore the place of apologetic witness in this multifaceted missional outreach by the Christian community.

1.2 Challenges to Christian Apologetic Witness in a Globalizing World

For Christians in many parts of the world, such as South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, religious pluralism has always been a fact of life. Yet, Christians in Europe and North America lived for many centuries in relatively homogenous Christian societies. With the rise of modernity, the main challenges to their faith did not come from other religions, but from Enlightenment rationalism,

[6]Masood, *Into the Light,* 60, 152; cf. Mark A. Gabriel, *Jesus and Muhammad: Profound Differences and Surprising Similarities* (Lake Mary, FL: Frontline, 2004).

[7]Jean-Marie Gaudeul, *Called from Islam to Christ: Why Muslims Become Christian* (Crowborough, UK: Monarch, 1999), 57-86.

[8]Antony Flew, *There Is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind* (New York: HarperOne 2007).

secularism, and later from postmodern relativism. Western Christian apologetics has therefore been ill-equipped to deal with the apologetic challenges presented by other religions and by radically different cultural outlooks on life.

Because of the global dominance of Western theology, this limitation has influenced Christian apologetics more widely. This is one of the reasons that apologetics is often experienced as irrelevant, because it is too Western and intellectualist. Local intellectual challenges were often addressed without reference to apologetics. John Mbiti and other representatives of the first generation of modern African theologians, for example, gave significant attention to the question of whether the God of the Bible was already known in Sub-Saharan Africa before the missionaries arrived.[9] This was in fact an apologetic question, because one of the greatest challenges to Christianity in Africa was precisely that Christianity was the White man's religion and therefore not for Africans.[10] Mbiti was addressing this challenge by showing that this God was already in Africa before the missionaries came, but did so under what we would call "African contextual theology" rather than apologetics.

Religious pluralism presents one of the main apologetic challenges in today's world. This is now also true for the Western world which through the media and international migration is confronted with the depth, existential relevance, and vitality of other religious traditions at a time when the Christian faith is waning and often suspect. At one level, the experience of religious pluralism in general can easily undermine the credibility of any particular religion. At another level, each religious tradition presents its own particular apologetic challenges for Christian witness. The more general challenge of religious pluralism will also present itself differently depending on which cultural and religious traditions shape the cultural environment. In a secular environment, it may lead to the idea that all religions are mere human constructs. In a Hindu context, it may lead to a belief that there exists an unknown divine mystery beyond every particular religion and that each one should simply adhere to the tradition in which they are born.

Religious pluralism is closely related to cultural pluralism, because religious outlooks deeply shape cultures. They are not the same, however, for particular religious traditions can be expressed in different cultural forms. Southeast Asian Islam looks different from the Islam of the Arabic heartlands. In a different manner, the Christian faith can also be embodied or incarnated

[9]John S. Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa* (London: SPCK, 1975).

[10]Jesse N. K. Mugambi, *Critiques of Christianity in African Literature: With Particular Reference to the East African Context* (Nairobi, KE: East African Educational Publishers, 1992).

in many cultural forms. We will keep returning to the relationship between religion and culture. Just as religious pluralism has led to religious relativism (the idea that no one can make a universal religious claim), cultural pluralism has led to cultural relativism (the idea that what we believe to be true is determined by our cultural location).

The problems of religious and cultural pluralism are not merely intellectual problems, but have existential ramifications. They shape how we experience ourselves in this world. In terms of the "sociology of knowledge," they lead to the "vertigo of relativity"[11]: the moment we start realizing that there are so many options of understanding this world, it becomes much harder to choose at all. This results in an experience like the vertigo of someone spinning at high speed and being unable to find one's balance and orientate oneself in the world. As a reaction to that vertigo, Berger says, people may also look for new certainties by simply avoiding all difficult questions, resulting in different sorts of fundamentalisms.[12] Some people would call everyone with a sturdy religious conviction a fundamentalist, yet the term is better used for people who are unable or unwilling to reflect on critical questions with regard to their religious or ideological positions. In this sense, there are not only religious but also secular fundamentalisms.[13] Both relativism and fundamentalism are inimical to apologetic dialogue: religious and cultural relativism because it does not make sense to argue for the universal validity of a culturally relative standpoint, and fundamentalisms because they are unable or unwilling to engage in an open conversation with alternative points of view.

Cultural pluralism raises particular issues for a number of dominant forms of Christian apologetics. As argued elsewhere, Western apologetics in the modern era has most often followed a particular structure characterized by what we might call "universalist foundationalism."[14] *Foundationalism* is an epistemology (a theory of knowledge) that understands human knowledge after the analogy of a building. A building is solid and trustworthy if it has a solid foundation and if the entire building is constructed well on that foundation. In the same way, human knowledge should start from a good foundation and should use appropriate forms of construction so that everything we

[11]Peter L. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), 9.

[12]Peter Berger, ed., *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 7.

[13]Vinoth Ramachandra, *Subverting Global Myths* (London: SPCK, 2008), 154-56.

[14]Benno van den Toren, *Christian Apologetics as Cross-Cultural Dialogue* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 35-92.

believe can be grounded on that foundation. *Universalist* foundationalism is the form of foundationalism that says that only those beliefs can be the foundation of a sound knowledge structure that are universally accessible or acceptable. All ideas that cannot be argued for on the basis of such universally acceptable foundational ideas must be rejected. This universalist foundationalism characterized most of the modern Western philosophy that started in the Enlightenment. In response to the religious wars that devastated Europe in the seventeenth century, intellectuals started looking for a universal starting point for knowledge, culture, and values.[15] Values and beliefs should therefore no longer be based on any religious revelation or other inherited beliefs that could be contested. Such a universalist foundation could, for example, be found in the universal truths of reason, thus leading to rationalism. Or one could look for such a foundation in neutral empirical observations, thus leading to empiricism. Beliefs and values could only ask for universal acclaim if they could be based on such a universally acceptable foundation.

Most modern Western forms of Christian apologetics accepted the basic structure of this universalist foundationalism and argued for the universal value and truth of the Christian faith precisely on the basis that it had a universally valid foundation. This basis could be universal truths of reason,[16] neutral empirical observations of the universe,[17] or a universally recognizable religious experience.[18] Other apologists looked for hybrid forms of apologetics that tried to respect the unique structure of the Christian faith but still intended to formulate universally valid apologetic arguments. One form would be an apologetic based on supposedly neutral and accessible historical facts about Jesus Christ, proving his resurrection and divinity.[19] Others might be looking for universally valid criteria by which competing worldviews can be judged, such as criteria for consistency and empirical fit.[20]

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[15]Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2012), 112-15.

[16]Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1976); Stuart C. Hackett, *The Resurrection of Theism: Prolegomena to Christian Apology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1982).

[17]William Paley, *Natural Theology: Or, Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity, Collected from the Appearances of Nature* (Farnborough, UK: Gregg, 1970).

[18]Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, ed. and trans. Richard Crouter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996 [1799]).

[19]Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus, God and Man*, trans. Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1968); John Warwick Montgomery, *Faith Founded on Fact: Essays in Evidential Apologetics* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1978).

[20]Harold A. Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991); Ronald H. Nash, *Worldviews in Conflict: Choosing Christianity in a World of Ideas* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992).

These modern forms of apologetics have met with a lot of criticism, both theological and philosophical. Theologians such as Karl Barth argued that Christian faith is uniquely founded on God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ and can never be based on any rational truth or empirical observation that is universally accessible.[21] Furthermore, it is argued that such supposedly neutral apologetic arguments are not sufficiently serious about the fact that the cross of Christ is foolishness for unbelievers, who cannot but reject this because of their sin (1 Cor 1:23). Cultural pluralism raises further issues for this form of Christian apologetics following a universalist, foundationalist pattern. It has, after all, become apparent that far from being universally valued, empirical observations, rational truths, religious experiences, criteria for judging worldviews, or whatever was used as the basis for such supposedly universalist arguments, were themselves shaped by a particular historical-cultural development and not universally shared. Certain forms of Hinduism understand the world as *māyā* and would not consider empirical observations to be a trustworthy basis for coming to know the divine. Mahayana Buddhists believe the highest transcendent reality to be beyond our rational logical distinctions and an apologetic argument based on logical deductions would make little sense. Neither can religious experience be considered a universal starting point, because religious experiences are themselves shaped by the cultural and religious contexts in which they occur.[22] The religious experiences of a Baptist pastor in prayer, a Hindu *sadhu*, a Sufi mystic, and an African traditionalist will not be the same but are shaped by their expectations and spiritual practices.[23]

Next to religious and cultural pluralism, we need to consider a third characteristic of our planetary village that raises significant issues concerning the validity and nature of apologetics. Our current society is deeply worried about the relationship between religion and power. In the West, religious tensions are often seen to be at the origin of violent conflict and therefore religions need to be kept in check by a society dominated by secular values.[24] This link between religion and abuse of power seems to be substantiated by a range of political conflicts that are framed as religious conflicts, such as the

[21]Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics,* ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley et al. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–1975), 25-36; cf. van den Toren, *Christian Apologetics,* 77-86.

[22]George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1984), 32-41.

[23]Van den Toren, *Christian Apologetics*, 42-43.

[24]Cf. Vinoth Ramachandra, *Faiths in Conflict? Christian Integrity in a Multicultural World* (Leicester, EN: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000), 141-65.

former civil war in Northern Ireland, the continuing conflict in Kashmir, and the tensions between the Burmese majority and ethnic minorities in Myanmar. In Western Europe, the suspicion concerning the relationship between religion and power is also linked to a feeling of guilt about its colonial past, which in the collective memory is closely linked with the expansion of Christianity through the modern mission movement.[25] Christian mission is therefore seen as an expression of Western imperialism. This colonial legacy is not only brought up by Western critics of Christian mission and apologetics but is also used in postcolonial societies such as India as one of the reasons for rejecting the Christian legacy, a colonial heritage that needs to be abandoned.[26] Historically, Christian missions have indeed colluded with colonial powers, and the church will need to repent of this. Yet, the relation between mission and colonialism is varied and in many other instances, missionaries have rather opted for the local populations against the colonial powers.[27] Furthermore, looking back, many churches established by Western missionaries are now able to embrace the gospel as a gift in itself—even if it originally arrived in the colonial era. It can even be used in the struggle for political freedom and the development of one's own cultural identity over against neocolonial powers.[28]

These close associations between religion and power will not only throw suspicion on mission and evangelism in general, but also on apologetics. Postmodern and postcolonial heirs to Michel Foucault will deconstruct all religious positions in terms of the power-plays that they supposedly reflect. Such an analysis understands apologetic witness not as concerned with truth but with power. Arguments that claim to search for and appraise truth are deconstructed as camouflaged bids for power. From a Christian perspective, we would not agree with this analysis. Though arguments and ideas can be and often are weapons in a power struggle (cf. Lk 22:25), they need not be. As we will explore below, the search for truth and goodness is the only real answer to the oppressive abuse of false truth claims. A faith in a crucified

[25]John Hick, "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity," in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, ed. John Hick and Paul Knitter (London: SCM Press, 1988), 17.

[26]Arun Shourie, *Missionaries in India: Continuities, Changes, Dilemmas* (New Delhi: ASA Publications, 1994).

[27]Ramachandra, *Faiths in Conflict?*, 168; Brian Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag: Protestant Missions and British Imperialism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Leicester, UK: Apollos, 1990); Vishal Mangalwadi, *Missionary Conspiracy: Letters to a Postmodern Hindu* (Mussoorie, India: Nivedit Good Books, 1996).

[28]Benno van den Toren, "The Significance of Postcolonial Thinking for Mission Theology," in *Interkulturelle Theologie. Zeitschrift Für Missionswissenschaft* 45, nos. 2–3 (2019): 210-28.

Lord is particularly well placed to unmask such false claims to power and truth (see further §7.3).

Looking back over this section, we can conclude that the religious and cultural pluralism of our global village on the one hand, and the suspicion and abuse of power in our postcolonial world on the other, raise a number of crucial issues for apologetic witness. They relate to the content of such witness, methodology, style, and even legitimacy of the entire enterprise of apologetic witness. In terms of its *content*, we will need to develop an approach to apologetic witness which takes into account the great variety of audiences, rather than doing it as if only Western critical questions are worth serious attention.

That it has been so hard to develop such a contextually sensitive apologetic witness also raises questions concerning apologetic method. As we have seen, much of Western apologetics presupposes that a valid apologetic argument needs to start from a universally shared foundation. We need to develop new methods of apologetic witness that rather ask how the unique truth and relevance of Christ can be commended to a particular audience. We further need to look for an approach to apologetic witness that is not narrowly rationalist, but that takes the entire person with their history, culture, and communal ties into account. In terms of style, we need to look for forms of apologetic witness that testify to truth in humble and vulnerable manners, rejecting all cultural or political power games.

This leaves the question open concerning the *legitimacy* of the entire apologetic enterprise. Does it make sense to give an account of the Christian hope, or is this simply an expression of a camouflaged imperialistic power play? Can we argue for the universal relevance of the gospel or will all words about God evaporate in confrontation with the ineffable mystery that all religions can only partially grasp? Do we have an anchor beyond our particular cultural location or are all beliefs merely rafts on which we float past each other in the vast ocean of cultural relativity? Can we acclaim our faith universally or is faith in Christ just that: faith that has no other basis than our unique personal encounter with him? In the next two sections, we will give an initial defense of the importance of apologetic witness in Christian mission, both on theological and missiological grounds. The issues of power and of cultural and religious relativism, are, however, complex and will remain with us in a number of subsequent chapters.

1.3 A Theological Apology for Apologetics

The biblical exhortation in Peter's first letter—to give "an account for the hope that is in you"—is not an isolated occurrence in Scripture, which we might leave aside in different contexts. Neither is it required for merely pragmatic reasons for a church that wants to survive in a multireligious environment. We want to argue rather that apologetic witness is inherent to the Christian faith and given with the nature of the salvation we have received. In this section, we will first explore theological reasons behind the call to engage in apologetic dialogue, and in the following section we will further develop some of the missiological reasons that are particularly relevant in light of the processes of globalization we have sketched above.

The crucial role of apologetic witness is given with five interrelated characteristics of the Christian faith,[29] the first four of which make it a missionary religion. Christianity is a missionary religion because it believes that the God it serves is the one God, Creator of *the whole earth*. In this respect, it differs from ethnic religions that consider their religious practices only to be relevant for the members of their clan, tribe, or people group that have the same ancestors. Such ethnic religions will rarely engage in mission outside the boundaries of their group. If some religious practices that originated in such religions, such as voodoo, are now claiming a much wider following, it is because they are changing under the influence of global migration. A second characteristic that makes Christianity a missionary religion is that it believes that God can be *known*. Though God is infinitely greater than what our finite minds can ever grasp (1 Tim 6:16), the God of Jesus Christ has revealed Godself in God's history with the people of Israel and in living among us in Christ. We have come to know God's character—not exhaustively, but truly and adequately. This is different from religions which understand the divine mystery to be utterly ineffable, beyond all human words. If that is the case, there is no reason to suppose that the stories, words, and symbols a particular community uses to talk about the divine are any better than those of others.[30] We argue therefore that Christians are committed to a critical realist epistemology with respect to God,[31] a position that we will further develop in chapter three. The third characteristic is the fact that Christians believe that they have received knowledge concerning *salvation*. Christians believe that God has acted once and for all for the salvation of the world in Jesus Christ. This does not necessarily

[29]Van den Toren, *Christian Apologetics*, 15-25.
[30]Cf. Andrew Walls, "The Translation Principle in Christian History," in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 26.
[31]Van den Toren, *Christian Apologetics,* 16-18; 120-38.

mean that all who have never heard consciously about Christ in their earthly lives will be eternally lost. That is a separate question that falls beyond the scope of this study. Yet, it does mean that redemption from death and fullness of life can only be found in Christ. Christians therefore desire to share this precious gift with others.

A fourth characteristic may be less obvious—or it may rather be so obvious that in certain contexts it is not even worth mentioning. Christian belief concerns *a divine reality beyond and before our human ideas*. In our postmodern world, it is increasingly common to think of religions as human constructs, as ways in which communities organize their lives and structure their worlds in order to make it livable and meaningful. This is sometimes argued for with the help of Ludwig Wittgenstein's notion of a language game, according to which religions are like cultures by which people structure their lives.[32] If all religions are human constructs, they may still be valuable, but living a religion does not compel someone to be evangelistic about it. It can be perfectly okay for different communities to organize their lives differently and to give a particular meaning to how they live, but this would only be valuable for this community, recognizing that other ways of providing structure and giving meaning may be equally worthwhile. It is of course possible that certain religions or aspects of religion are no more than human constructs, in some respects wise and beneficial, in others foolish or even destructive. Those who reject the Christian faith may consider it a social construct. For believers, however, the Christian faith cannot be understood as merely a human construct, for this religion is all about God's self-revelation. This self-revelation demands we critically deconstruct our human-made images of God, which are unmasked as idols. And it is about God saving us from sin and death, precisely because we cannot save ourselves. Because of these theological traits, the Christian faith demands a realist or, more precisely, a critical realist understanding of theological knowledge. In chapters three and five, we will develop a number of crucial building blocks needed for a critical realist epistemology in view of the interfaith apologetics project. This is of course particularly acute in light of the way religious and cultural pluralism makes us aware of the degree to which our understanding of reality in general—and of ultimate reality in particular—is shaped by our cultural and historical location.

These four characteristics make Christianity a missionary religion that desires to share what it has received in Jesus Christ with all nations to the ends

[32]James Kellenberger, "The Language-Game View of Religion and Religious Certainty," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 2, no. 2 (1972): 255-75.

of the earth. It does not yet necessarily give a place to apologetic witness. Some argue that faith in this message is only and entirely a gift of the Holy Spirit. Faith is therefore considered a unique form of knowledge. In evangelism, we therefore simply proclaim the truth of the gospel, praying that the Holy Spirit will allow the hearers to accept it. This position is called fideism because of the central role of faith (*fides*). Fideism is different from relativism. Fideism rather believes that there is a universal objective truth for all, but this truth can only be known through the supernatural gift of faith and can never be understood by unregenerate people.

This position may sound pious because it gives such a central place to the Holy Spirit. But it is not biblical. The work of the Holy Spirit is central in evangelism and in people coming to faith. Yet, the Holy Spirit also works through ordinary human means, including ordinary means by which we come to know and judge different truth claims.[33] The Bible itself not only exhorts us to give an account of our hope, but constantly gives such accounts itself. Both the prophets of the Old Testament and the evangelists of the New do not simply invite people to believe the otherwise unbelievable, but constantly plead and reason with their hearers and readers. However, they do not use the supposedly universally valid arguments that modern Western apologists might expect. They point to God's decisive actions in the history of Israel and Jesus Christ and address the specific issues of their particular audiences. The prophets explain why not all prophets are to be trusted equally and how to distinguish between false and true prophets (e.g., Jer 23:9-40).[34] The four evangelists all tried to persuade their particular audiences that their testimony was trustworthy (see further §5.3). This biblical practice is reflected in the long history of Christian apologetic witness that in each generation and context addresses new challenges.[35] Furthermore, God holds people accountable for their unbelief in Jesus. They will even be judged for it: "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I will tell you, on the day of judgement it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you" (Mt 11:21). Faith is not a gift presented to some and denied to others. The gospel is presented to all, and people are

[33]Stephen C. Evans, *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith: The Incarnational Narrative as History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 285-87.

[34]John Goldingay, *God's Prophet, God's Servant: A Study in Jeremiah and Isaiah 40–55* (Exeter, UK: Paternoster Press, 1984), 43-57.

[35]Cf. Avery Dulles, *A History of Apologetics*, Modern Apologetics Library (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2005).

invited to make up their minds—and they will be judged if they will not embrace the truth in their unwillingness to come clean with this God. Yet, this biblical apologetic witness is far from narrowly rationalist. It addresses the entire person with its deepest desires; it calls for conversion of the will; it takes relational bonds seriously and is aware that the call to conversion also involves a spiritual battle in which we need to depend on the power of the Holy Spirit who is able to overcome strongholds.

The Roman Catholic philosopher Paul Griffiths argues that the above arguments do not just hold for the Christian faith, but for all religious and secular worldviews that claim to have an understanding of what true salvation means for all humanity. They have a moral obligation to share this salvation with others and to try to convince others that this salvation is available and where it can be found.[36] That is why interfaith dialogue that involves missionary religions will regularly and naturally lead to apologetic interchange. The "truth" question is inevitably on the table: Is what we believe to have received concerning salvation indeed the greatest conceivable gift, or is it rather something of limited value, or even a figment of the human imagination?[37]

1.4 Missiological Motivations for Interreligious Apologetic Dialogue

Alongside these theological reasons, there are a number of broader missiological reasons why apologetic witness is a crucial part of the broader missional calling of the church in today's world. The first reason has to do with the ethics of mission. Christian mission is radically different from propaganda and averse to all forms of manipulation and "proselytization" in the negative sense.[38] If missions in the past have sometimes used power and manipulation, thus producing what can be called "rice Christians," the church should repent from it. We should repent from it because God never forces God's love on people but always offers Godself freely, allowing for rejection. Prophets could be rejected, as could the message and the gift of the Son himself who accepted rejection up to the point of going to the cross. God wants us to freely embrace this free gift of love. God might be able to force us to become subjects of a divine king or slaves of a divine master, but God rather wants us to be children

[36]Paul J. Griffiths, *An Apology for Apologetics: A Study in the Logic of Interreligious Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991).

[37]Cf. Mark S. Heim, *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 24.

[38]Ajith Fernando, *The Christian's Attitude Toward World Religions* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1987), 152-55.

of the heavenly Father, friends and even bride of a heavenly lover. Such gifts can only be accepted freely. The father of the prodigal son was also a parable of God's character in that he did not force his son to stay with him, but allowed him to move to a far land, all the while waiting eagerly for his return. In the same way, the apostles and evangelist used nothing but an appeal to the truth and goodness of the message of Jesus to bring people to conversion, trusting in the power of the Spirit rather than on clever manipulation.

This appeal to a free acceptance of the truth and goodness and the gospel reflects the enduring nature of the relationship God intends with us. It also has a particular importance today. When, as pointed out above (§1.2), religions are so easily associated with the abuse of power, we need to stress that we invite others to believe this message because of its truth and goodness, not because we want to enlarge our community, feel threatened, or whatever interests people might suspect. We should avoid all manipulation. It needs to be clear first that our evangelistic efforts are not about growing the political influence of our community, but about God and salvation. It needs to be clear that conversion is not primarily a change of political or communal belonging (though it may result in such a change) but primarily a change of allegiance to Christ as Lord and Savior. It will also need to be underlined where religious communities use political power and other manipulative means to induce conversions that this doesn't do justice to what religion should be, at least not insofar as we have come to know God in Christ. Others may not be convinced because the power interests at stake are too great. But we have good reasons to keep challenging them and to do so with integrity.

Second, the apologetic aspect of Christian witness is crucial because otherwise we do not have a response to cultural relativism. People embrace cultural and religious relativism for a variety of reasons. It may be that like Pontius Pilate they have a profoundly pragmatist attitude to life and relationships and have pushed questions of truth to the margins of their lives (Jn 18:38).[39] This may be because it allows them to live comfortably in the present without considering any questions about the ultimate meaning of life. It may be because they have political interests to push religious convictions to the private sphere. It may be that they have given up on ever finding the truth about God, salvation, or ultimate meaning because of the "vertigo of relativity" induced by the many options. In all cases, a simple claim that Christianity is different will not provide an answer. We will need to argue what is at stake in

[39]Cf. Samuel Wells, *Speaking the Truth: Preaching in a Diverse Culture* (Norwich, UK: Canterbury Press, 2018), 169-74.

what religion or worldview we embrace. Religious beliefs and practices are not just a byproduct of other realities such as economics, politics, or social and psychological wellbeing. We will need to argue that the cultural and religious relativisms need themselves to be relativized as particular cultural and religious positions. And we will need to show that we can take our cultural location with utter seriousness without succumbing to relativism (see chaps. 3 and 5). In late-modern cultures, not explaining or showing a readiness to explain why we believe our convictions to be true and good for others will automatically mean that we have no answer to the paralyzing influence of relativism. This relativism tends to make any exchange of religious ideas a harmless game rather than a deeply serious affair addressing questions of ultimate truth, significance, and salvation.

A third missiological reason to give appropriate attention to apologetic witness in interreligious encounters is that we will otherwise have no message for those who are deeply invested in other religions.[40] Christian missional outreach too often invests most of its energy in the disenfranchised and marginalized of other religious communities. It is obvious that those who are well-rooted in their own religious traditions may be less open to consider alternatives. If, however, Jesus Christ is not only an answer to poverty and injustice—or a search for community or identity—but truly the answer to our deepest need for truth and salvation and to our longing for God, then we also (and particularly) have a message for those who are deeply embedded in their religious communities. We can only reach them if we start to dialogue with openness and integrity about their and our religious beliefs, asking whether beliefs are justified and what promises real salvation.

The issue of addressing those who are at the heart of other religious communities is compounded by the fourth missiological reason for taking apologetic dialogue seriously as an intrinsic aspect of interfaith encounter and witness: other religious traditions have their own apologetic discourse, both in favor of their own beliefs and against the Christian tradition. Many Muslims, for example, have a strong conviction that Islam is a more rational religion than Christianity, with its irrational beliefs in the Trinity, the atonement, and its corrupted scriptures and morals. Consider for example the widely available publications of Ahmed Deedat.[41] Our personal experience in interreligious encounter is that these views have such a strong warrant in these communities

[40]Harold Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 247.

[41]David Westerlund, "Ahmad Deedat's Theology of Religion: Apologetics through Polemics," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 33, no. 3 (2003): 263-78.

that many of its members will rarely consider seriously the Christian faith as an alternative, even if they are on a spiritual quest and aware of the Christian message. Many Hindus would not consider conversion because their apologetic for their own religious tradition tells them that everyone should grow spiritually within the religious tradition in which they are born.[42] Some skeptical onlookers would argue that this is precisely why interreligious apologetics does not make sense: Does this not prove that the truth cannot be known? Yet, diversity of opinion, even between well thought-through opinions, does not show that truth can never be ascertained. Consider a parallel case. People come up with contrasting views concerning economic policies, concerning vaccination against Covid-19, and about how to best address the climate crisis. A critical debate about these issues is complex and multilayered, particularly if we also consider ideological biases, personal interests, and historical loyalties that may be at stake. Yet the complexity of the issue does in no way mean that the debate isn't worth having and that either side is equally justified in their beliefs.

1.5 Defining Apologetics

In light of the foregoing theological reflections on the need for Christian apologetic witness and dialogue, we can define Christian apologetics as *the reflection on the dialogical witness to the truth and relevance of the Christian faith in order to recommend and present an accountable witness of the Christian faith to those who do not yet believe*. Let me point to a number of elements in this definition. First, this book is not itself an apology, but a study in *apologetics,* which is the study and critical reflection of how to engage in apologetic dialogue and witness. Concrete *apologies* (examples of apologetic witness and dialogue) should always be contextual and addressed to a particular audience. Furthermore, apologetic witness and dialogue most often do not happen in written form but in personal encounters, either one-to-one or while addressing larger audiences. This book is meant to help readers reflect on such ongoing dialogues in which they are probably already involved.

In the above definition, apologetic witness is directed to those outside the Christian community. We call this *external* apologetics as distinguished from *internal* apologetics, which is aimed at answering doubts and strengthening the faith within the Christian community. Though this study focuses on external apologetics, this cannot be neatly separated from internal apologetics, because the best way to grow in the ability to witness to outsiders is to grow

[42]Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism*, 256-59.

in one's personal confidence in the truth and all-surpassing relevance of Christ. We believe that many aspects of the argument in this study may also help to strengthen the faith of those who are wondering whether and how one can have confidence in Christ in a multireligious world.

In the above definition, apologetic witness intends to recommend and present an accountable witness of the faith. Apologetics is not about winning arguments but about winning people. People may still reject it even after they have heard the best possible exposition. This is evidenced when we look to people who encountered Jesus. Though no one represented the love of God more persuasively than he did, the clarity of the conviction it brought could also lead to rejection, precisely because people understood the power and implications of his message.

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