

# Apologetics in Church History

John K. Hopper

Christian apologetics have been gathering steam over the last sixty years. Names like C. S. Lewis, Norman Geisler, Alvin Plantinga, Josh McDowell, Lee Strobel, William Lane Craig, Alister McGrath, and Ravi Zacharias are not just found in dusty journals on forgotten library shelves. They have found their way into public debate, and have given skeptics of Christianity a run for their money. That said, one might get the impression that apologetics is a modern invention of the church, but nothing could be further from the truth. Christians have been providing reasoned argument for their faith throughout church history. In another article, I have outlined how Christians argued for the faith in New Testament times.<sup>1</sup> Here I provide a few examples of apologists since the New Testament canon closed.

## JUSTIN MARTYR (ca. 114-165)

Justin Martyr was among the earliest noted apologists and stood against those who charged Christians to be atheists because Christians did not believe in the Roman gods. In his *First Apology*,<sup>2</sup> and in other writings, he is found defending the resurrection:

But even in the case of the resurrection the Saviour has shown us accomplishments, of which we will in a little speak. But now we are demonstrating that the resurrection of the flesh is possible, asking pardon of the children of the Church if we adduce arguments which seem to be secular s [sic] and physical: first, because to God nothing is secular, not even the world itself, for it is His workmanship; and secondly, because *we are conducting our argument so as to meet unbelievers*. For if we argued with believers, it were enough to say that we believe; but now we must proceed by demonstrations. The *foregoing proofs* are indeed quite sufficient to evince the possibility of the resurrection of the flesh; but since these men are exceedingly unbelieving, *we will further adduce a more convincing argument* still,—an argument drawn not from faith, for they are not within its scope, but from their own mother unbelief,—I mean, of course, from physical reasons. For *if by such arguments we prove to them that the resurrection of the flesh is possible*, they are certainly worthy of great contempt if they can be persuaded neither by the deliverances of faith nor by the arguments of the world.<sup>3</sup>

What is of particular note in this defense of the resurrection is that Justin defends his use of apologetics before the church as well. He understands that his arguments are based on reason and not faith, and he argues that while faith is the language of those who

already believe, reason is what must be employed when debating with outsiders the matter of God and the resurrection of Christ with outsiders.

It is not surprising then that in his writings Justin discussed at length fulfilled prophecy and offered it as a “proof,” declaring:

Though we could bring forward many other prophecies, we forbear, judging these sufficient for the persuasion of those who have ears to hear and understand; and considering also that those persons are able to see that we do not make mere assertions without being able to produce proof, like those fables that are told of the so-called sons of Jupiter.<sup>4</sup>

He uses prophecy as evidence again when arguing against the Jews in *Dialogue with Trypho*,<sup>5</sup> as does Tertullian (ca. 160-220) in *An Answer to the Jews*.<sup>6</sup> For both men, the validity of the gospel could be rationally defended, and fulfilled prophecy was a reasonable proof.

## ATHENAGORAS (d. after 177)

Athenagoras of Athens also stood against those who labeled Christians as atheists. In his *Embassy for the Christians*, Athenagoras defended Christianity before the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius by stating that when others who had openly declared there is no God are charged with atheism, the Roman state is proper in their judgment. But the charge of atheism could hardly be true for those:

who distinguish God from matter, and teach that matter is one thing and God another, and that they are separated by a wide interval (for that the Deity is uncreated and eternal, to be beheld by the understanding and reason alone, while matter is created and perishable), is it not absurd to apply the name of atheism?<sup>7</sup>



## ORIGEN (ca. 185-254)

Perhaps the most important apologist of the third century was Origen, who responded to Celsus' criticisms of Christianity. In his lengthy *Contra Celsum*, he argued against what Celsus saw as the philosophical, ethical, and historical shortcomings of Christianity. For example, Origen contended that (1) Jesus did not do his miracles by sorcery, (2) Jesus' resurrection is better explained apart from hallucination, and (3) the

miracle stories of paganism do not offer the same credibility as those of the Gospels.<sup>8</sup>

### **AUGUSTINE (354-430)**

Augustine joined the earliest church fathers in apologetic efforts after he himself was persuaded by a well-reasoned faith. Prior to his conversion, Augustine was a member of a religious cult named after its third-century founder, Mani. Augustine, however, had intellectual doubts about Manichaeism, and after he received only shallow and poorly reasoned answers to his concerns, he abandoned his cultic beliefs. Not long after, Augustine found himself in dialogue with two Christian leaders, Ambrose and Pontitianus, who unlike Manichaean counterparts could intelligently address his questions and concerns.<sup>9</sup> Eventually, Augustine converted to Christianity and developed his own apologetic specifically aimed at the Manichaeans.<sup>10</sup> Augustine would also defend many doctrines of the faith, including an orthodox view of Jesus' deity, and even addressed the question of evil and free will.<sup>11</sup>

### **THEODORE ABU QURRAH (ca. 775-830)**

Another use of apologetics became important with the rise of Islam. Theodore Abu Qurrah responded to the charge that Christians, in holding to the doctrine of the Trinity, advocate a form of polytheism. In *On the Trinity*, he writes that the failure of Muslims to recognize Christianity as monotheistic is their failure to grasp the distinction between "persons" and "natures." If they understood the difference they could understand that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three persons, but are of one nature.<sup>12</sup> John of Damascus similarly argued against Islam, criticizing the claim of Muhammad as prophet. He did so on the basis that Muhammad provided no evidence for the divine inspiration of his message and that he falsified his claim to prophet-hood by endorsing sexual immorality. In regards to the former, John offers an *a fortiori* argument along the following lines:

1. The Qur'an stipulates that marriages and business transactions require witness.
2. No witnesses are provided that indicate that Muhammad came from God.
3. Since witnesses are required for the lesser concerns of marriages and business, they are certainly required to verify prophet status.
4. Since Muhammad has no witnesses to his prophetic status, he should not be considered a prophet.<sup>13</sup>

### **ANSELM (1033-1109)**

Anselm stands as one of the significant apologists of the Middle Ages. He, like Augustine, viewed faith as preceding understanding, but nonetheless offered arguments that

faith itself was reasonable.<sup>14</sup> The most famous of his apologetic endeavors was the development of the ontological argument, which posits that the idea of an unsurpassably great being is logically inescapable. Another of Anselm's major contributions to apologetics is found in his book *Cur Deus Homo* ("Why the God-man"), in which he argues that God became a man because, as an infinite being, he is the only one who could provide infinite atonement for man's sin.<sup>15</sup>

### **AQUINAS (1225-1274)**

Aquinas was also a prolific defender of the faith. In answering objections to the faith, including the claim that suffering is a defeater of God, he develops the cosmological argument in *Summa Theologica*:



In the world of sense we find there is an order of efficient causes. There is no case known (neither is it, indeed, possible) in which a thing is found to be the efficient cause itself; for so it would be prior to itself, which is impossible. . . . But if in efficient causes it is possible to go on to infinity, there will be no first efficient cause, neither will there be an ultimate effect, nor any intermediate causes; all of which is plainly false. Therefore it is necessary to admit a first efficient cause, to which everyone gives the name of God.<sup>16</sup>

This cosmological argument is offered alongside a teleological argument in which Aquinas argues:

We see that things which lack intelligence, such as natural bodies, act for an end, and this is evident from their acting always, or nearly always, in the same way, so as to obtain the best result. . . . Now whatever lacks intelligence cannot move towards an end, unless it be directed by some being endowed with knowledge and intelligence; . . . Therefore some intelligent being exists by whom all natural things are directed to their end; and this being we call God.<sup>17</sup>

With these arguments in hand, Aquinas replies to the objection of evil, stating:

Since God is the highest good, He would not allow any evil to exist in His works, unless His omnipotence and goodness were such as to bring good even out of evil. This is part of the infinite goodness of God, that He should allow such evil to exist and out of it produce good.<sup>18</sup>

## THE REFORMERS

The Reformers' contribution to Christian apologetics is limited in the traditional sense of apologetics. More often than not their arguments are not towards those who deny God, but relative to the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. Furthermore, the Reformers, because of their views on the depravity of man, did not see reason as the means by which men would come to faith. John Calvin writes, "It is preposterous to attempt, by discussion, to rear up a full faith in Scripture."<sup>19</sup> This is not to say, however, that Calvin was fully resistant to the use of reason if for no other reason than "to stop . . . obstreperous mouths" of unbelievers. Calvin, while believing "the Spirit is superior to reason" still believed that Scripture could be supported by reasonable argument:

It is true, indeed, that if we choose to proceed in the way of arguments it is easy to establish, by evidence of various kinds, that if there is a God in heaven, the Law, the Prophecies, and the Gospel, proceeded from him. Nay, although learned men, and men of the greatest talent, should take the opposite side, summoning and ostentatiously displaying all the powers of their genius in the discussion; if they are not possessed of shameless effrontery, they will be compelled to confess that the Scripture exhibits clear evidence of its being spoken by God, and, consequently, of its containing his heavenly doctrine.<sup>20</sup>

### JOSEPH BUTLER (1692-1752)

With the rise of deism, skepticism, and atheism in the days of the Enlightenment and following, we find a number of new apologists. Joseph Butler wrote what is recognized as the most important criticism of deism ever published. In his *Analogy of Religion*, he undermines the deists' arguments against the Christian claim that Christ is the only means of salvation and what deists called obscure evidence in favor of Christianity.<sup>21</sup>



### WILLIAM PALEY (1743-1805)

William Paley, on the other hand, took on atheists in his long-recognized work *Natural Theology*. There he addresses objections still common today: God is nothing but a god of the gaps; only the results of supposed divine design are ever seen, never the act itself;

organisms have "flawed designs" (as evidenced, for example, by vestigial organs) which point at best to an imperfect designer; and chance cannot be discounted simply because of improbabilities. It is in *Natural Theology*

that Paley introduces the famous "watchmaker" design argument to explain how the design of the universe inevitably points to a designer:

In crossing a heath, suppose I pitched my foot against a *stone*, and were asked how the stone came to be there; I might possibly answer, that, for any thing I knew to the contrary, it had lain there for ever; nor would it be perhaps so easy to show the absurdity of this answer. But suppose I found a *watch* upon the ground, and it should be inquired how the watch happened to be in that place; I should hardly think of the answer that I had before given, that, for any thing I knew, the watch might have always been there. Yet why should not this answer serve for the watch as well as for the stone? why is it not admissible in the second case as in the first? For this reason, and for no other, *viz.* that, when we come to inspect the watch, we perceive—what we could not discover in the stone—that its several parts are framed and put together for a purpose, *e.g.* that they are so formed and adjusted as to produce motion, and that motion so regulated as to point out the hour of the day; that, if the different parts had been differently shaped from what they are, or placed after any other manner, or any other order, than that which in they are placed, either no motion at all would have been carried on in the machine, or none that would have answered the use that is now served by it. . . . This mechanism being observed . . . the inference, we think, is inevitable, that the watch must have had a maker—that there must have existed, at some time, and at some place or other, an artificer or artificers who formed it for the purpose which we find it actually to answer, who comprehended its construction, and designed its use.<sup>22</sup>

### BLAISE PASCAL (1623-1662)

The French mathematician and scientist, Blaise Pascal, added his voice of reason to the others, and is best known for his practical apologetics. While offering a list of "proofs" for Christianity that included the design argument, the witness of the apostles, and fulfilled prophecy,<sup>23</sup> he argues that even if reason could not decide the matter one is nonetheless wise to bet on the Christian proposition:

"God is, or he is not." But to which side shall we incline? Reason can decide nothing here. There is an infinite chaos which separated us. A game is being played at the extremity of infinite distance where heads or tails will turn up. What will you wager? . . . Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is. Let us estimate these two chances. If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager, then, without hesitation that He is.<sup>24</sup>

In perusing the pages of history, we see it's not just modern theologians and philosophers who have argued for the Christian faith. It has been the practice of Christians from the church's earliest days. Together the voices of the past create "a great cloud of witnesses" of those who walked by faith in the use of apologetics in obedience to Scriptures and for the defense and advancement of the kingdom. Such a cloud should give modern apologists even more confidence in the importance of presenting a reasonable case for the Christian worldview.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John has long served in pastoral ministry and earned his D.Min. at Biola University in apologetics/worldviews. He is a contributing author of [\*Reasons to Believe: Thoughtful Responses to Life's Toughest Questions\*](#).

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- <sup>1</sup> John K. Hopper, "Apologetics & The New Testament," [www.jkhlibrary.com](http://www.jkhlibrary.com), accessed Feb 17, 2016.
  - <sup>2</sup> See Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, Roberts-Donaldson English Translation, ch. v and vi, Early Christian Writings, accessed November 5, 2013, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/justinmartyr-firstapology.html>.
  - <sup>3</sup> Justin Martyr, *Fragments of the Lost Work of Justin on the Resurrection*, Roberts-Donaldson English Translation, ch. v, Early Christian Writings, accessed November 5, 2013, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/justinmartyr-resurrection.html>, emphasis added.
  - <sup>4</sup> Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, ch. lii.
  - <sup>5</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, Roberts-Donaldson English Translation, ch. li-liv, Early Christian Writings, accessed January 14, 2014, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/justinmartyr-dialoguetrypho.html>.
  - <sup>6</sup> Tertullian, *An Answer to the Jews*, trans. S. Thelwall, ch. viii-xi, Early Christian Writings, accessed January 14, 2014, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/ter tullian08.html>.
  - <sup>7</sup> Athenagoras, *A Plea for the Christians by Athenagoras the Athenian: Philosopher and Christian*, trans. B. P. Pratten, ch. vi, Early Christian Writings, accessed November 5, 2013, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/athenagoras-plea.html>.
  - <sup>8</sup> Kenneth D. Boa and Robert M. Bowman, Jr., *Faith Has Its Reasons: Integrative Approaches to Defending the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), loc. 658-70, Kindle.
  - <sup>9</sup> Moreland, *Love the Your God*, 42.
  - <sup>10</sup> Augustine, *On the Morals of the Manichaeans*, trans. Richard Stothert, rev. and ed. Kevin Knight., accessed November 5, 2013, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1402.htm>.
  - <sup>11</sup> Augustine, "Evil and Free Will," in *Christian Apologetics: An Anthology of Primary Sources*, eds. Khaldoun A. Sweis and Chad V. Meister (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 419-21.
  - <sup>12</sup> House and Jowers, *Reasons for Our Hope*, 163-64.
  - <sup>13</sup> House and Jowers, *Reasons for Our Hope*, 164-65.
  - <sup>14</sup> Boa and Bowman, *Faith Has Its Reasons*, loc. 727-32.
  - <sup>15</sup> Boa and Bowman, *Faith Has Its Reasons*, loc. 733-65.
  - <sup>16</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 2nd and rev. ed, 1920, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican, 1 p, Q2, Art 3, New Advent, accessed November 5, 2013, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/1002.htm>.
  - <sup>17</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1 p, Q2, Art 3.
  - <sup>18</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1 p, Q2, Art 3.
  - <sup>19</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes*, trans. Henry Beveridge, vol. 1, ch. 7, sec. 4, accessed November 6, 2013, <http://www.spurgeon.org/~phil/calvin/bk1ch07.html#four.htm>.
  - <sup>20</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, vol. 1, ch. 7, sec. 4,
  - <sup>21</sup> House and Jowers, *Reasons for Our Hope*, 181-85.
  - <sup>22</sup> William Paley, *Natural Theology*, London edition (New York, NY: American Tract Society, 1881), 1, accessed November 6, 2013. <https://archive.org/stream/naturaltheology00pale#page/n23/mode/2up>.
  - <sup>23</sup> House & Jowers, *Reasons for Our Hope*, 191.

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<sup>24</sup> Blaise Pascal, "The Wager," in *Christian Apologetics: An Anthology of Primary Sources*, ed. Khaldoun A. Sweis and Chad V. Meister (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 96-97. Originally published in *Pensées*, 1669.