

# Observations on Apologetics and Its Relation to Contemporary Christian Mission

Thomas Schirmacher

*Christians often think of apologetics as something that only academics do, but actually it has been an essential part of Christian mission ever since the book of Acts. This article offers penetrating reflections on the meaning of apologetics today and how all Christians should equip themselves to do it.*

The classical justification for apologetics can be found in 1 Peter 3:15b-16, which provides the basis for the name given to this activity: ‘Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason (Greek *apologia*) for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.’

If one understands apologetics as the thoughtful defence of the Christian faith against non-believers and mission more generally as the proclamation of the Christian message to non-believers, then the two concepts, though different, are so interrelated that they are difficult to separate from each other. Gerhard Ruhbach, for example, says with respect to the early church, ‘If the missionary sermon states what the Gospel consists of, then apologetics responds to critical objections or unfounded prejudices against the Gospel.’<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, the distinction is justified; on the other hand, it is hard to demonstrate clearly in concrete situations. For in the early church, missionary sermons responded to listeners’ typical objections and thoughts by presenting apologetics as to what is essential and different about the Christian message.

Translating the Christian message into a new language or making the message understandable to new audiences (1 Cor 9:19–23) involves responding to their culture, thinking and concerns and addressing the specific reasons that could lead to a rejection of the message. The same applies to every sermon delivered in Christian worship.

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<sup>1</sup> Gerhard Ruhbach, ‘Apologeten, altkirchliche’, *Evangelisches Lexikon für Theologie und Gemeinde*, vol. 1 (Wuppertal: R. Brockhaus, 1998), 98.

Conversely, the defence of the Christian message does not aim purely at self-assurance. Rather, it gives reasons for our own faith to others. In the process, it also always hopes that our counterpart, after listening to our depiction of the hope within us, will make Jesus Christ his or her own hope.

The relationship between this pair of terms can be understood in three different ways, as discussed in the next three sections.

## The apologetics of the Christian mission

We see apologetics within Christian mission in the apostle Paul's epistle to the Romans.<sup>2</sup> Mission is not a marginal Christian activity but is rather inseparably connected with the central message of the gospel and is even rooted in the essence of God himself.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, there can be no defence of missions that does not amount to a defence of the Christian faith itself, as Romans demonstrates. Conversely, there can also be no form of Christian apologetics which does not sketch the contents and special features of the Christian message, and which does not also think through, justify, explain and defend the missionary side of Christianity.

We can see the relationship between apologetics and missions negatively in that those who have stopped defending the absolute claims of Christianity over against other religions have soon, if not at the same time, abandoned central beliefs historically found in all Christian denominations.

Since the very function of missions has been fundamentally questioned in the Western world amidst the rise of a pluralistic theology of religion, the apologetics of Christian missions has nowadays become a necessary component of every defence of the Christian faith.

## Apologetics as missions

Apologetics is also always important for the believing church. Every member of the church should learn to respond to questions from those around them in a thoughtful manner and to evangelize in a relevant way. It is not only new converts who retain within them much of the thinking found in their surrounding environment and need solid answers to this thinking. Rather, according to Paul, all Christians are subject to ways of thinking that come from the spirit of their age and their environment (the 'world'). Instead of adapting to that thinking, they should be renewed in their thinking through constant testing and transformation (Rom 12:1–2).

Only in this way can Christians avoid becoming confirmed to the *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of the times (Rom 12:1). Therefore, the *Zeitgeist* should not be viewed as existing primarily in the 'evil world out there'; it is in our heads. Only those who are prepared to ask themselves again and again, in a self-critical way, what the standards of their thinking are and where they lead can change their thinking and then also their actions.

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2 Thomas Schirmmacher, 'Paulus—Theologe und Missionar: Gedanken anhand des Römerbriefes', *Evangelikale Missiologie* 27, no. 1 (2011): 3–20; Thomas Schirmmacher, *Der Römerbrief*, 2 vols. (Nuremberg: VTR; Hamburg, RVB, 2002).

3 Thomas Schirmmacher, *Missio Dei* (Bonn: VKW, 2011).

In addition to being able to give an account for what they believe, Christians must also invest time in understanding other schools of thought, so that they can answer the questions raised by followers of other worldviews in a meaningful way.

Many aspects of the surrounding environment, such as prevailing philosophies and cultural practices, penetrate the Christian community in very fundamental ways. For this reason, it is not astonishing that there has always also been an apologetics against heresies within the body of Christ, as well as apologetics between Catholics and Protestants. In the nineteenth century, Catholics used the word mainly as a technical term for arguing against Protestant theology. For the same reason, in the early church, apologetics became known as the 'mother of dogmatics'. In academic theology, apologetics is part of systematic theology alongside dogmatics and ethics, and in its practical application it is also a segment of practical theology.

Finally, since the emergence of various varieties of liberal theology and historical-critical methods that raised questions about the historical foundations of the Christian faith, a special apologetic has been needed in this area. Thus, for example, Pope Benedict XVI contended in his book on Jesus that nothing has done more to destroy faith than certain varieties of historical-critical theology.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, his exegesis of the Gospels, in which he works out his understanding of what constitutes the centre and essence of the Christian faith, has strongly apologetic traits. (Neither Pope Benedict nor I intend to rule out all use of historical and scientific methods in investigating the texts of Scripture.)

Insofar as apologetics responds to criticism from outside the faith community and reacts to the respective environment (i.e. to other religions, philosophies and cultures as well as everyday reality), it is in effect missionary work even if it apparently addresses Christians.

And insofar as mission efforts never proclaim the gospel in a pure form devoid of culture—as if the gospel could be read in the same fashion everywhere and at all times, with no reference to cultural contexts—but rather seek to proclaim the gospel in a culturally relevant manner, mission also always has a strongly apologetic component. For example, the four New Testament Gospels, which were addressed to different target audiences, each contain a different apologetic component, even though they all proclaim 'the gospel'.

## **Academic apologetics in organized world missions**

### *Specialist resources in apologetics*

We now turn to the role of technical apologetics in organized world missions. But to provide a meaningful answer to this question, we must narrow the meaning of both terms. On one hand, we cannot simply define missions as every expression of the Christian faith that becomes visible to non-believers. Rather, it is the practical execution of organized efforts to present the gospel to the world. On the other hand, apologetics here does not mean every attempt to defend the faith but, rather, a conscious practice of addressing common questions or challenges to the Christian faith and thinking through, explaining and defending Christian positions. Today,

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4 Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus von Nazareth*, vol. 1 (Freiburg: Herder, 2007).

this activity occurs mostly via academic apologetics in theology, philosophy, the natural sciences or other relevant subjects by Christian clergy or educated Christian lay individuals.

One important aspect of the question here concerns how much we need specialized resources in apologetics. To what extent is a missionary dependent on the results of an apologist's work, or to what extent must missionaries themselves become apologists? Conversely, how much must the apologist necessarily learn and know from missionaries' experiences so that his apologetics remain relevant?

Here we leave aside the fact that the Holy Spirit gives gifts which, depending on the situation, can enable a missionary to function in a highly intellectual manner or even to develop completely new ways of proclaiming Christianity. This same factor of Spirit-enablement also applies to learning a foreign language for world missions work or the ability to exhibit empathy, i.e. to put oneself in the shoes of another individual. Abilities and spiritual gifts are distributed to differing degrees here and are applied with varying degrees of success. At this point, we are not concerned in detail with how the two tasks of apologetics and missions are distributed among committed Christians, but fundamentally with how, overall, the two tasks should be carried out.

We certainly cannot conclude that apologetics should happen only in an academic context, such as in public debates on university campuses with academic representatives of other religions and worldviews. Instead, apologetics is closely connected with the responding to the culture and language of one's listeners.

Apologetics reached its first peak in church history around the second and third centuries. These so-called 'apologists' played an important role in the formulation of Christian confessions, but almost all of them also thought fundamentally about how missions should look. The Epistle to Diognetus, for instance, is a defence of the Christian faith dating from the third century by an unknown author, which at the same time prescribed missionary principles.

The medieval apologists to Islam always also made fundamental missiological observations, as can be clearly seen in the work of Peter the Venerable (1092–1156) and Raimundus Lullus (1232–1316). Martin Luther had the Koran translated from Arabic so that he could better study and refute Islam. He linked this work to fundamental considerations as to how to present the gospel to Turks.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the fathers of modern missiology were all masters of apologetics. One source referred to German missiology pioneers Gustav Warneck and Franz Michael Zahn as both 'masters of polemical apologetics'.<sup>5</sup> Warneck's colleague Theodor Christlieb, who held a doctorate in philosophy, was not only a promoter of evangelization in Germany but also a missionary to the educated and an author of apologetic works.<sup>6</sup>

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5 Werner Ustorf, 'Missionswissenschaft', *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, vol. 23 (Göttingen: De Gruyter, 2000), 90.

6 Thomas Schirmmacher, *Theodor Christlieb* (Wuppertal: Telos, 1985).

*Research on language and culture*

To proclaim the gospel in another language and another culture—or even within one's own culture to a particular target group—it is necessary to study how others speak, think, feel and live. When we do this, every response to the other person's thought world is also intentionally or unintentionally an answer to it—that is, an apologetic.

For example, if we want to enter into a meaningful conversation with Indonesian Muslims about the Christian faith, we must be willing to gain a deep understanding of our dialogue partners. This may mean studying languages and cultures—perhaps even island by island—and also learning what most distinguishes Indonesian Islam from other forms of Islam, what makes it more peaceful, and where its challenges lie.

Although Christians belong only to Christ and are subject only to his word, this does not mean that they should view their own culture or other cultures critically. On the contrary, they are obliged, out of love, to adjust to the culture of others. Paul explains this principle of evangelism in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23, precisely in the context of affirming his own freedom:

Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

Christians are responsible not only for articulating the message of salvation in Jesus Christ, but also for ensuring that it is properly understood. Obviously, Christians can live even in their own culture in such a way that they are poorly understood by others. In this situation, they can become obstacles hindering others from receiving the gospel (1 Cor 9:12).

The mere fact that the one gospel of Jesus Christ, as contained in the Bible, is presented in the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) to four different target groups proves that Jesus' words were not disseminated solely in his original language and cultural context, but in multiple forms so that as many people as possible could understand it. Jesus' own addresses were not delivered in their original language but in an understandable translation. When it is reported in the New Testament that apostles and Christians proclaimed 'the Word of God', that does not mean that they simply read the texts of Scripture, but that they presented the message in a suitable fashion to their immediate listeners. To this day, sermons do not consist of reading long Bible texts in the original languages of the Bible. Instead, preachers typically read a Bible text, interpret it, and apply it to listeners' life situations.

This is also the reason why the Bible must be translated into every conceivable

language and why the gospel can and should be expressed in every dialect and every cultural form.

*The apologetic side of mission stems from the nature of conversion*

When the World Evangelical Alliance, along with the Vatican and the World Council of Churches, jointly signed the ecumenical declaration ‘Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World’ in 2011, we stated things that many Christians consider self-evident. For example, that document notes that Christian mission should occur in the spirit of Jesus—without violating the human dignity of others; without coercion, corruption or deception; without state aid or social or cultural pressure. Faith means placing one’s deep personal trust in God. This arises from word and testimony, through which an individual hears the message and is moved to understand and embrace it by the work of the Holy Spirit.

Once we have agreed that the sole acceptable way to express the gospel to others is through conversation, personal concern and living as a positive example, and that all this is aimed at helping the other person to believe, trust and hope in Christ—and furthermore, if we grant that all this communication and demonstration must occur in the receiving individual’s time, culture, language, thought world and personal circumstances—then apologetics automatically becomes indispensable. In short, anyone who rejects the idea of forced conversion must follow the path of apologia and, in a friendly and modest manner, must seek to explain to others again and again the reasons why we have trusted in Christ and why they should do so. This is exactly the message of 1 Peter 3:15–16.

This is also precisely what Jesus means when he says that one should not precipitously follow him. Jesus gave the illustration that whoever wants to build a tower must first consider how he will finance it (Lk 14:27–33). The conversation, the intellectual exchange (understanding ‘intellectual’ here in the broadest possible sense), and the explanation of one’s own faith through dialogue are all part of the path that mission efforts must take.

*The example of Paul’s address at the Areopagus*

Whereas Paul largely justified his case regarding the Jews from Scripture (e.g. Acts 13:26–41; Rom 2), in his mission to the Gentiles he frequently resorted to reasonable argumentation procedures, borrowing from the wisdom of the Greeks. He could appeal to the judgement of his listeners (1 Cor 10:15), connect to ideas of the Stoics and Epicureans (Acts 17:16–34) or to Roman concepts of God (Acts 14:8–18), or rely on conclusions derived from nature (Rom 1:18–32).

According to the book of Acts, the apostles started the discussion at the point where their paths and those of their hearers parted ways, but they based their arguments on common prerequisites for thinking. Therefore, when they engaged with Jews, they did not argue over creation or the inspiration of the Old Testament; they proceeded directly into a discussion about Jesus Christ. When they interacted with Gentiles, they went back much further and also discussed creation, presupposing what was taught and seen about the Creator in the respective culture as well as in biblical testimony (e.g. Acts 14:8–18; 17:16–34). For this reason, Paul was able to prove the existence of a creator in his famous address at the Areopagus

in Athens (Acts 17:16–34) by quoting Greek philosophers without explicitly referring to biblical testimony.

This address demonstrates that Paul studied Greek philosophers intensively and planned his address especially for his listeners. He did not simply resort to generally known sayings, but also to remote texts. In Titus 1:12, Paul quoted the poet Epimenides, to whom he also appealed in Acts 17; indeed, he used a line which has a direct link to the Epimenides quotation in Acts 17:28. Paul critically picks up on philosophers and paraphrases their thoughts, for instance when he refers to the fact that God does not need any help from human beings (Acts 17:25)—a thought which contradicted Greek religious practice but can be found almost literally in Plato, Euripides and other Greek philosophers.

Paul's address in Athens shows how important it is to study other religions and worldviews and their texts and to adapt oneself to their followers in thought and language. This message thus becomes a prime example of a missionary sermon, in both content and procedure. In Acts 14:15–17, Paul proceeded quite similarly in dealing with the admirers of Zeus, although we do not encounter any quotations from philosophers there—perhaps because the audience was less educated or because the report is briefer. Many commentators have pointed out that the speech in Acts 17 is merely a practical implementation of Romans 1.

#### *Apologetics was formerly more public*

Apologetics should be an integral part of any training for world missions, and missions should not underestimate the necessity and impact of apologetics along with that of diverse ways of preaching. It is not part of the essence of Christianity to follow someone blindly; rather, adopting the Christian faith involves understanding with firm conviction what and why one believes. That feature of Christian faith must also repeatedly be made clear to the outside world.

Conversely, the research and reflective work of apologists is helpful for missions only if it does not isolate itself but rather learns from the experiences of world missions and preceding attempts to think through issues in missiology.

Public, academic apologetics, in the form of lectures or public panel discussions with those who think differently, is one practical mission method. Unfortunately, public apologetics used to occupy more space in world missions than it does today. For example, the German missionary Karl Gottlieb Pfander engaged effectively in public discussion with Islamic theologians on several continents. In the Anglo-Saxon world, where such public debates still occur frequently, their development has been somewhat different than in the rest of the Western world including Germany, where such public engagements are rare and are perceived by many as aggressive or dogmatic.

Today, this kind of debate has shifted more to the Internet, where it is very widespread. The apologetic interaction between Islam and Christianity on the Internet and on social media, for example, can no longer be overlooked. Not only are there tens of thousands of relevant pages on the Internet, but pertinent forums are accessed daily by millions of people. In view of this development, Christian missionaries urgently need the support of committed experts who have both

thoroughly studied their counterparts and can provide viable answers to key questions.

### Can apologetics convert?

No less an individual than Karl Barth has argued that apologetics cannot lead any human being to faith, since it takes unbelief as its starting point, so to speak. Rather, Barth stated, dogmatics based on the Word of God must be the starting point of proclamation.<sup>7</sup> As much as I understand Barth's concern, and as much as it is correct that the task of apologetics is not to reinvent faith but to defend it and make it understandable, he himself is guilty of self-contradiction here, for Barth's dogmatics also has strong apologetic traits, insofar as he grapples with everything and everyone along the way.

It is also a widespread view that apologetics can only remove obstacles but cannot replace the proclamation of the gospel. However, according to 1 Peter 3:15–16, Christians are to defend not only particular, commonly discussed aspects of classical apologetics, such as the question of whether one can prove the existence of God, but generally our Christian hope in all its facets. Therefore, proclamation cannot help but include addressing issues raised by a counterpart within the contents of the Christian message. There can be no artificial dividing line between refutation of arguments and explanation of the alternative.

Of course, apologetics by itself can convert no one. But according to the Reformers, this is true for the proclamation of the gospel as well. God's word works on the hearts of people, no matter in which special way it is spoken, as the Holy Spirit enlightens people's hearts and minds. Indeed, As 'Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World' states, 'Christians affirm that while it is their responsibility to witness to Christ, conversion is ultimately the work of the Holy Spirit' (cf. John 16:7–9; Acts 10:44–47). They know that the Spirit blows where he wills, in a way that no man can control (cf. John 3:8).

Why shouldn't this principle also apply to reasonable discussions arising from questions, doubts or attacks by those who think differently? The practical experience of people who talk about they have encountered God also shows that persuasion by this method actually occurs again and again.

Today, more than ever, science and research determine our everyday lives. Moreover, thanks to globalization and the Internet, all debates, including those about the Christian faith, have become globalized. Accordingly, we need apologetic missionaries and missionary apologists more than ever. As my colleague Rolf Hille has said, 'In the consciously post-Christian culture of European modernity, no retreat is called for. Rather, the strength of the apologetic mission is once again required.'<sup>8</sup>

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7 Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, vol. I/1 (Zürich: TVZ, 1932), 24–35.

8 Rolf Hille, 'Apogetik', *Evangelisches Lexikon für Theologie und Gemeinde*, 1:102.



### Questions to consider

1 Peter 3:15–16 refers to doing apologetics ‘with gentleness and respect’. What does that mean to you practically?

Do you find public panel discussions and debates between Christians and others useful? Why or why not?

Can people be converted with the help of apologetics?

What significance should apologetics and apologetic knowledge have in the everyday life of a local church?

### Useful sources

‘Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World’, 28 June 2011: <https://worlddea.org/yourls/ert444witness>.

Christine Schirrmacher, ‘The Influence of Higher Bible Criticism on Muslim Apologetics in the Nineteenth Century’, in Jacques Waardenburg (ed.), *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 270–79.

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