

## Role of apologetics in academic life: Discussion notes

This is a transcript of a discussion on apologetics. This was part of the apologetics symposium arranged by the Christian Academic Network on 7 March 2015 at Birkbeck University London.

We are very grateful to Andrew Basden for these notes. They are mainly arranged in the order in which things were discussed. However, for clarity, some items about a common topic have been grouped together.

[Square brackets enclose material that was not actually said in the discussion. They have been added to help those not present understand what was actually said.]

### Definitions

There are many views on what exactly is apologetics. Apologetics can be seen as either:

- a very broad discussion
- used in defence of a Christian view
- used to demonstrate that a Christian view is rational

The mandate for apologetics comes from 1 Peter 3<sup>15</sup> *“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.” (NIV)*

However, who might be the “everyone” in the academic context? It could be colleagues, or students. It could be to those who are atheists, post moderns etc.

### Apologetics in practice

This is very hard work, a lifetime’s task to find an integrated of apologetic which related Christ to our discipline / fields? Particularly if it is to cope with any issue in a specific field.

- It will address both the content and variety of subjects considered.
- It will need to take into consideration the person who is coming at us. It will to address their viewpoint rather than just our own.
- It will need at all times to keep as close to Scripture as we can get.
- It will approach the person(s) being addressed with modesty, humility
- It will need to be tailored and presented in a variety of ways in order to address the concerns of the person(s) coming at us

### What questions need to be addressed in discussing apologetics?

This will depend on the role(s) of apologetics have in academic life.

- It probably depends on what role academics have in society (that was discussed, but the speaker probably meant it as a preliminary to the role of apologetics in academic life).
- It can provide evangelistic opportunities for academics
- It more probably (more often?) be used more in post-conversion rather than pre-conversion
- It is possibly more useful pastorally than evangelistically or academically

What if students ask questions, and we feel "Help"? We can tell them "I'll think about it and get back to you". If we do that, it is imperative that we keep our promise and come back to them. However, that approach only works for people whom we will meet again, such as students.

We need to demonstrate our trust in a greater reality. We need to provide a credible, rational answer to the question(s) raised.

### The power of "I don't know"

There is power in admitting that we do not necessarily know the answer to every question.

A case was quoted where a Zen Buddhist who began searching for himself when he asked, "Why did God create?" and a Christian replied, "I don't know."

There can be three reasons for "I don't know"

- because we are human and certain things we cannot know
- because we need to do more work on obtaining an answer to the question (n.b. we can still be Christian and not know)
- because it is an appropriate responses to people we won't meet again

### On questioning people (using apologetics)

Apologetics can be used to:

- ask questions, or can question with other things, like philosophy
- ask question of the non-Christian which can disclose their areas where they don't know
- ask questions about the basis of what others say. (E.g. in India there are many young people who are looking towards secularism and materialism. To them we can point out what secularism means and ask "Do you really believe that?" or "Do you really want that?")
- to expose the consequences [entailments?] of what others say they believe. [We were thinking about talking to non-Christians who want something other than Christ.]

Reflection: Some wondered if that is relevant to the role of apologetics or is it more to help people get framework for their morality etc.

It is essential that we do not argue against people, but about the ground of what they are thinking. (Immanent critique)

### Plausible cultural narratives

Apologetics can be used in two ways

#### **In defence:**

- be use in dealing with plausible, non-Christian, current narratives. (E.g., many believe science is against religion. But that is not true)

#### **In affirmation**

Positive research [especially historical] can

- can make the Christian faith more plausible (e.g. a paper given in 2014, which showed Christians at forefront of animal welfare, and which helped a Hindu reviewer to a different view of Christians, whom he had previously thought to be cruel)
- can show the Christian roots of history (e.g. ISIS v feminism)

### A suggestion

One delegate suggested that the role of academics is to develop apologetics. [This remark was not taken up in the discussion]

## Possible topics for apologetics

Three major points of connection today were identified as:

- ethics, virtue
- personhood
- suffering

An additional topic was the issue of whether or not God exists:

- The reality of meeting Jesus through the Scriptures
- What would life be like if God didn't exist?"

(Some considered that arguing apologetically for God's existence is not usually productive. If so, then the above is about what is effective, and it raises the question on "what else to do instead?")

## Structures / systems rather than individuals

Example: Job stress.

Christians often try to solve this in an individualistic way, e.g. seek strength from God, or ask God to get us out of the stressful job (but that only means someone else goes into the stressful job). This cannot be sufficient / the right approach. The answer must be to change the system or structure so that such jobs are not stressful.

Examples of structural issues:

The following were discussed:

- models of education
- the idea of gay marriage presupposes that society consists of adolescent males - yet most Christian response is individualistic
- What is expected of employees? Example, The assumption even these days [about the commitment expected to our jobs] is that a person has a spouse at home to do all the housework.

So structural issues seem to be about what society believes as a presupposition, i.e. accepts as 'normal'. The role of apologetics in addressing structural:

- communally (including outside the church). (e.g. similar to the SDC notion of 'Friends')
- help individuals can speak up
- help individual make small suggestions, and these can result in gradual changes
- demonstrate interdependence

## Additional points made

It was recognised that it is easier to criticise than to suggest solutions.

## Personhood

This particular topic was discussed in some depth.

It was reported as being a major theme in these days i.e. who the person is. The following contributions were made:

- Christian thinking has something important to contribute on this topic
- There is a temptation to reduction. E.g. to see person = consumer
- Dooyeweerd's discussion of personhood may be useful:-
  - the \*functioning\* of the person in every aspect [e.g. person as consumer is seeing person from the perspective of the economic aspect]

- The 'self', which does the functioning, is fundamentally beyond analysis. (19<sup>th</sup> Century Von B... on human mystery)

### Additional comments made

Case 1: "If I become a Christian will I commit intellectual suicide?" We need an answer to that. Apologetics helps.

Case 2: "The Christian framework is too intellectually rigid" (almost the opposite of case 1). Again, apologetics can help

Bigotry and reductionism was mentioned'

It was noted that there are several meanings of reduction. The analytic reduction into small pieces is valid. Reference was made to the book by Roy Clouser 'The Myth of Religious Neutrality', has a good section that distinguishes several kinds of reduction. [Also, see "<http://www.dooy.info/reduction.html>" for about six distinct kinds]

### Practical ways ahead

Over the 12 years since CAN was founded, little has been published. Whatever Christian Academics do must be written and published. (E.g. in CAN Perspectives, CAN Discussion forum etc.)

We need to consider what **topic(s)** to address, what **style** to use and what **type** of apologetics to undertake. This is an ambitious project and time availability is a problem. Maybe we have to sacrifice some time to this that could otherwise be directed towards REFable papers.

Maybe the best way is to get 2-3 people working together. One person on their own is likely never to do it. A large group is too cumbersome.

### Feedback received after the symposium

One delegate shared afterwards (because they did not have a chance to say it at the time) that:

- Affirmation was discussed
- Critique was discussed
- Enrichment of existing thinking was not discussed very much.

Maybe there is an opportunity here?