

“I Attack You with Words” – Medieval Lessons for European Apologetics

When Peter the Venerable wanted Christians to engage in critical dialogue with Muslims he had to realise that *“there was no one who answered, since there was no one who understood.”* So he commissioned the first Latin translation of the Quran and tried to convince the brightest mind of his time to refute it. We can learn from his example and also from his failures in these areas: criticism of the crusading ideology, confidence in rational argumentation across worldview boundaries, efforts to argue from common ground. In this workshop we will also detect some of Peter's shortcomings by comparing his argumentation to that of four other apologetic works from other eras.

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I. Why Peter the Venerable, the Middle Ages, and a Latin Apologetic that no-one read(s)?

II. Peter the Venerable (1092-1156) and the genesis of *Contra sectam saracenorum*

A. Peter and the crusades

1. (Mostly) in favour at least until 1151

2. Criticising military crusades before the second crusade (1147-1149)

I attack you, indeed, but not as our people often do, with weapons, but with words, not with force, but with reason, not with hatred, but with love – with a love, however, which is such as ought to exist between admirers of Christ and those averted from Christ; just as it existed between the Apostles and the Heathen of those times, which were invited to the law of Christ; just as it is exerted by the creator and governor of all things, God himself towards those whom he – while they were still serving creation not the creator – dissuaded by the help of his servants from adoring idols and demons. (CSS 24.6-7)

B. Peter and rational argumentation across world-view barriers, aka apologetics

1. Dealing with opposition: *“severe accusations of different people”* (CSS 22.5)

a. The example of the Church Fathers

b. The example of the Paul (2 Corinthians 10:4-5).

c. Salvation for Muslims

A Latin book translated into foreign language might possibly be fruitful to people whom live-giving grace wants to win for God. (CSS 19)

d. Arguments for doubting Christians (cf. Acts 18:27-28)

e. Carrying out one's duty and trusting God (John 3:8, 1 Cor 3:7)

I will not err completely if I do with simple glance what is my duty. A labour taken up for the sake of God can certainly not remain fruitless, whether it becomes useful for converts, withstands enemies, admonishes our people or at least does not make the writer lack the promised "peace for all people of good will". (CSS 21)

2. His worldview allows him to do it

a. A longstanding tradition

b. Religious beliefs are propositional (true or false)

But, you men of such intelligence in worldly matters, by what evidence is this proven? (CSS 59)

c. Inter-religious communication is possible

3. Peter is for rational argumentation

4. Peter seems to respect his readers

a. His frankness: *I write in order to invite you to salvation (CSS 26.6)*

b. His polemic: The "*nefarious Muhammed*", "*a godless*" "*liar*"

c. His respect: "*reasonable by intellect and learning*" (CSS 29.1-5)

III. Getting it done: Methods, plans, actions

A. The conditions for Apologetics are not fulfilled

Whether the erroneous teaching of Muhammad is called by the ugly name of heresy or taunted as pagan, it must be confronted in written form. Once the Jews marvelled at the various languages of the apostles. This old zeal – following the Jew's words – has abated. The Latins and even more our own contemporaries only master the language 'in which they were born' and thus they could not perceive the nature of this grave error – not to say that they were unable to confront it. Therefore 'my heart glowed hotly within me and my senses caught fire'. I was filled with indignation that the Latins did not know the reason for such a ruin and that through this very ignorance no one could be moved to resist. For there was no one who answered, because there was no one who understood. (CSS 17.1-12)

- B. Finding out what they think and believe
- C. Getting the brightest mind to do the job
- D. ... or do it yourself (with a little help from your friends)
- E. Reaching the audience

IV. *Contra sectam saracenorum* – comparing the arguments

- A. Strange authorities
 - 1. Use their own authorities
If I want to prove something, I therefore use examples of points which you have already conceded, which you have already acknowledged. (CSS 150.8-11)
 - 2. Where are the poets, philosophers and scientists?
 - 3. My authorities might not be impressive
 - 4. Epistemic authorities: What we see, hear, ...
 - 5. Everyday experience:
... vague news is coming from you in the East to us in the West. (CSS 29.13-14)
- B. Insecurity, foreignness, lack of knowledge ... and he knows it

V. Lessons for European apologetics: always be prepared to ...

- A. Look in the mirror: Closed circles, even of errors and heresies...
- B. Take the effort: satisfied with prejudice and rumour (cf. Augustine, De Genesi ad litteram)
- C. Pay the cost and face opposition
- D. Communicate effectively: a lively and catchy style. Which metaphors?
- E. Love the audience
- F. Hope
- G. Fail ... and what is failure?

Suggested Readings

Petrus Venerabilis. "Contra sectam saracenorum." In: Gleij, Reinhold (ed.) (1985). Petrus Venerabilis. Schriften zum Islam. Altenberge: CIS-Verlag. 31-225.