

## Too Good Not to be True: The Shape of Moral Apologetics

Apologetics is about communicating, not merely talking. It requires that we *understand* those with whom we speak: what they think, the questions they're asking (and not asking), the assumptions they're making; and the misconceptions that keep them from listening to what we have to say. If we don't understand the soil, we may be scattering seeds in vain – talking but not communicating, making noise but not making progress. Perhaps the deepest, soil-hardening challenges to the apologetic task in our time are moral objections to Christianity – to the (perceived) immorality of Christian attitudes and behavior in history and the present. In this session we think about apologetics and its relation to “soil management,” consider the apologetic role and importance of moral goodness, and suggest some ways to help people come to see the gospel as too good not to be true.

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Men despise religion. They hate it and are afraid it may be true. The cure for this is first to show that religion is not contrary to reason, but worthy of reverence and respect. Next make it attractive, make good men wish it were true, and then show that it is.

Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*

### I. A brief sketch of apologetics

#### A. Apologetics as art and science.

Apologetics is the art and science of explaining and defending the truth-claims of the Christian worldview. As a *science*, it requires mastering information and arguments. As an *art*, it requires understanding one's 'audience' and tuning what one knows towards engaging them in real communication.

#### B. Apologetics as positive and negative.

Positive apologetics points to the truth of the gospel by offering reasons - positive pointers. Negative apologetics answers objections; clears away obstacles that obstruct one's vision of the truth of the gospel.

C. Apologetics and believability (credibility and plausibility).

For S to assent to proposition X as being true—to *believe* X—S needs to think that X *is* true. X must be ‘believable’ to S. There is a *credibility filter* in S’s mind that X must successfully pass through, before S can believe X (*is* X true?). Apologetic strategies have traditionally focused on this, providing evidence that the gospel is true. But there is a prior filter in S’s mind that X must successfully pass through before S will even entertain the question whether X is true (and thus, evidence that it is): the *plausibility filter* (*could* X be true?). ‘Soil’ considerations primarily enter at this point: if one has misconceptions about the gospel, faulty assumptions, experiences with bad Christians, absence of good Christians, or some other issues that render Christianity unattractive or unthinkable, one may simply write it off from consideration entirely (it *couldn’t* be true) and never seriously consider evidence that it *is* true. Much of the apologetic task today involves *plausibilising* the gospel; softening the soil so that seeds may be able to penetrate.

## II. The goodness of God and why it matters

A. We are drawn to God through his goodness.

1. Bible

- a. Tasting the goodness of God (Ps 34.8, 1 Pe 2.2-4)
- b. Bible’s greatest worship hit (1 Chron 16.34, etc.)
- c. Nearness of God is my good (Ps 73.28)

2. Boethius

3. Augustine

4. Aquinas

5. Calvin

B. Anselmian apologetics

St Anselm reflected upon the implications of our understanding of God as the maximally perfect Being, or ‘that than which nothing greater can be conceived.’ In classical terms, the supreme values in the moral, cognitive, and aesthetic

realms are truth, goodness, and beauty (GTB). In classical Christianity, God *is* the GTB; the ultimate ground and source of all cognitive, moral, and aesthetic value. It is both appropriate and effective for us to appeal to considerations of GTB in pointing to God. He is the ultimate ground of goodness, truth, and beauty; he is their origin, and he is to be worshiped as such. Pointing to the unity of GTB in God is a fruitful way to see the apologetics enterprise in a unified way.

### C. Grasping that God is good

1. Traditional apologetics and God's goodness.
  - a. Negative: responding to problem of evil
  - b. Positive: moral arguments (MAs) for theistic belief.
2. Learning from the phenomenology of moral experience.
3. Grasping that God requires an experience of goodness associated with God and the gospel.

### D. The power of embodied moral arguments

Traditional MAs for theistic belief represent one expression of pointing to the goodness of God, but fall short as persuasive apologetics. Where the moral evidence for God is most important is prior to argument: it is *seen*, rather than heard. We not only want to be able to *make sense* of our experience of moral value and long for a worldview that does so (that connects our experience and our aspirations, and provides a solution for our guilt in falling short of what we know to be good), but we also deeply want and need to *experience* these things – to experience goodness, forgiveness, and cleansing. Moral pointers to God and the gospel are important and intuitive, but it is in their embodied, experienced expression in Christian lives and community that they are most important and powerful (plausibility). Because this need is so deep, moral pointers to the gospel are important and compelling, and moral objections to the gospel (Christian lives and community that is *not* good) are devastating.

1. Douglas Coupland
2. Le Chambon

### III. Moral objections

Moral objections are perhaps the most crucial soil-hardening factors to the gospel – just as moral pointers are perhaps the most crucial soil-softening factors. So just as in positive apologetics we need to think about moral evidence, in the broadest sense, so we need to take very seriously the negative apologetic task of answering moral objections. People are not interested in the ‘true’ if it is not connected to the ‘good’.

### IV. Moral apologetics

Thus, we need to think strategically about the moral aspect of our apologetic. This will be both positive and negative: The positive task is pointing to goodness of God in strategic and typically embodied ways, softening the soil and planting seeds. The negative task is clearing away obstacles, the obstacles of moral objections to God.

#### A. The positive task: an apologetics of goodness

1. Early Christian history
  - a. Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*
  - b. Tertullian
  - c. The Roman plagues
2. Jesus (Matthew 5.16)

#### B. The negative task: engaging moral objections and objectors

We need to think through, understand, and respond effectively. This must involve both mastering concise, memorable, thoughtful responses to moral objections, and developing long-term, plausibilising strategies. Some suggestions:

1. Love, love, love.

Moral objections typically go back to unloving Christians. We shouldn't make things worse.

2. Engage in dialogue.

Seek to understand and engage the objection and the objector. The goal is not 'answers' but engagement. Don't win the battle and lose the war. Since the issue is goodness, and it must be *seen*, how we deal with the person is as important as what we say.

3. Ask questions.

Ask questions and listen – the approach of Socrates and Jesus. Crucial questions include: What do you mean? How do you know that? What do you think follows from that? Before seeking to answer an objection it is important to get clear – and help the objector get clear – about what it actually *is*. Sometimes an objection is little more than a slogan or throwaway objection that the objector has heard but not really thought about or evaluated. Or there may be a more specific, maybe even a deeply personal problem that the objector has in mind, which you will miss if you just charge in to answer it. (For example, if she brings up the “problem of evil,” it is important to ask what it is that she sees as a problem here. It may turn out that she has suffered a recent tragedy, which requires a much different, more pastoral response than if she has just taken a philosophy class that talked about the “logical” problem of evil.)

4. Look for misconceptions and misinformation.

Often moral objections rest on or are fueled by misunderstandings and misinformation – e.g. that Christians burned millions of witches or opposed science. What do you mean by ‘Christian’? How do you know that (millions of witches were burned by Christians)? Are you sure about that? Identifying misunderstandings, asking the objector to provide evidence, helps to put the dialogue on an evidential basis and opens the door for you to tell the other side.

5. Uncover assumptions.

Often underlying assumptions are the most important elements of the discussion, but because they lie under the surface, unexamined, it flounders. They are typically vague and untested and often are false or involve further misunderstanding or misinformation. It is important to try to bring these to the surface, analyze them, and deflate them, in order to be able to set the discussion within the right context. What do you think follows from this (e.g. the hypocrisy of Christians)? Why do you think that?

6. Acknowledge problems.

Besides the many misunderstandings and false assumptions, there is plenty of truth in moral objections to Christian attitudes and behavior in history. We need to be humble enough to follow the evidence where it leads and to acknowledge the problems that there are. Only then can we set it in a proper context. "I acknowledge that I, too often, am part of the problem."

7. Put into context.

Having analyzed the issue, put it into a proper context ("It seems that the fundamental question here is ..."). Characterize the discussion as a collaborative quest to discover the truth, rather than as an argument or disagreement. Frame it in terms of fundamental worldview issues: What do you think this (e.g. bad human behavior) tells us about reality? What does this say about the human condition? Do you think Christians are alone in this, or is it a universal part of the human condition? What should we look for in a diagnosis and prescription for this problem? Look for illuminating metaphors or analogies (The Christian church is a kind of hospital for sinners, so it's not a surprise to find sinners/sick people there).

8. Tell the rest of the story.

Once the issue is put into the proper perspective, the 'rest of the story' needs to be told, as appropriate, as a matter of fairness and intellectual honesty. We not only need to acknowledge problems, we need to be fair to the facts. Here's where much of the 'science' of apologetics in this

area comes in. Fortunately there are increasing resources to draw upon.

9. Engage alternatives.

In the common quest for truth we must evaluate a position in light of its alternatives. It is crucial that the objector realize that not simply Christianity is on trial, so that if it has a problem we can simply reject it and the quest is over. We have to see whether alternative worldviews are more adequate or more problematic – as in other areas, we need to look for the explanation that makes the best sense of the data, with the fewest difficulties. The objector, no less than the Christian, has to give an account of moral reality and the human condition. Moral objections reflect or presuppose an awareness of moral reality - objective moral standards. What is the best explanation of that? Can naturalism provide a plausible account?

10. Turn the tables.

Job questioned God with moral objections. God responded by asking questions of his own, penetrating questions, which pushed Job to see things differently. Moral considerations are both theoretical and deeply personal, and lie very close to the heart of the gospel. We should sensitively seek to draw the connection between them, helping people to consider the implications for themselves – often, again, by asking questions. Often, lying behind the objection there is a kind of contradiction or inconsistency in the objector's moral perspective. As a relativist, on what basis do you criticize Christian behavior? Why do you say repression is wrong? Does your worldview have the resources to justify that judgment? How do you explain hypocrisy and bad behavior? How do you deal with hypocrisy in your own life?

11. Look for positive pointers to the gospel.

Moral objections reflect an ultimate longing for the Good, the True, and the Beautiful; they are 'signals of transcendence' (Berger). Turn the negative apologetic of response into a positive apologetic pointer to the gospel. The fundamental moral issues that give rise to the moral objection are themselves rightly understood in light of the ultimate grounding of morality in the Good himself. The problem of Christians behaving badly is part of the bigger question of why human beings in

general behave so badly. How do we understand that? Which perspective has the resources to account for it, explain it, and provide a finally satisfying solution to it? The moral concerns that underlie moral objections are all closely related in some way to some core element of the gospel or the general shape of the Christian worldview.

12. Jesus is the answer.

God's answer to Job's moral objection was God himself. Jesus is the answer to our deepest problems, and he – not Christians or 'Christianity' – is the heart of the gospel. Thus, we need to direct the discussion to him as the focus of attention (cf. Paul in Acts 17). In each case, seek to introduce Jesus' view on this: have you considered what Jesus thought about this? (What do you think was Jesus' view of hypocrisy? Let's look at it). Typically Jesus himself addressed and condemned the very behavior objected to, so that 'Christians' who act this way are acting contrary to the gospel.

13. Long-term plausibilising strategies.

*Be good and do good* (Mt 5.13-16, 1 Pe 2.9-12). As apologists, address moral objections head-on, with speakers and presentations. Raise assumptions, deal with them, tell the rest of the story, and be humble.

14. Love, love, love.

These are still the three most important things...



***Suggested Readings:***

- Boa, Kenneth and Larry Moody. *I'm Glad You Asked: In-Depth Answers to Difficult Questions About Christianity*. (2 ed.) Search Ministries, 2013.
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- Orr-Ewing, Amy. *Is the Bible Intolerant? Sexist? Oppressive? Homophobic? Outdated? Irrelevant?* Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005.
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