

GOOD (AND BEAUTIFUL) NEWS FOR POSTMODERN APOLOGISTS

DOUGLAS KEITH BLOUNT*

“Reason is the greatest enemy that faith has; it never comes to the aid of spiritual things, but more frequently than not struggles against the divine Word, treating with contempt all that emanates from God.”

Martin Luther¹

“No one is unaware that there are two ways by which opinions are received into the soul, which are its two principle powers: understanding and will. The most natural is by the understanding, for we ought never to consent to any but demonstrated truths; but the most usual, although against nature, is by the will. For every man is almost always led to believe not through proof, but through that which is attractive.”

Blaise Pascal²

“What is now decisive against Christianity is our taste, no longer our reason.”

Friedrich Nietzsche³

ABSTRACT. This paper concerns the practice of Christian apologetics in postmodern contexts. Although postmodernists eschew modern accounts of rationality, contemporary apologists typically view their discipline as aimed at providing arguments and evidence for Christianity in terms of such accounts. Therefore no one should be surprised that those arguments and evidence fail to persuade postmodern audiences. Given this situation, Christian apologists need to embrace a broader, more comprehensive vision of their task, one unfettered by distinctively modern commitments. The way forward involves appreciating the significance of aesthetic judgment within postmodern contexts and pursuing an apologetic path designed to exploit that significance. The first section of this paper discusses Nietzsche as setting the stage for postmodern perspectives according to which aesthetic judgment—or, as he puts it, taste—

* DOUGLAS KEITH BLOUNT (PhD) is Professor of Christian Philosophy and Ethics at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY. His main research interests include hermeneutics, philosophical theology, and philosophy of science with emphasis on the divine attributes, postmodern literary theory and the realist/non-realist debate. E-mail: dblount@sbts.edu.

1 *The Table-Talk of Martin Luther*, trans. William Hazlitt, Christian Classics Ethereal Library (Philadelphia, PA: The Lutheran Publication Society, 2004), § 353, 116.

2 *The Art of Persuasion*, in *Pensées and Other Writings*, trans. Honor Levi (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1995), § 2, 193.

3 *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1974), § 132, 186.

becomes the guide; the second section discusses Athenagoras of Athens as providing a vision for Christian apologetics that appeals to such judgment. The paper concludes that Athenagoras's vision, which emphasizes the beauty and goodness of the faith rather than its rationality, provides an important corrective and useful guide for apologists inclined to focus exclusively on arguments and evidence à la modernity.

KEY WORDS: beauty, philosophy, apologetics, Nietzsche, Athenagoras

Introduction

Christian apologists typically understand their discipline to aim at demonstrating the rationality of Christian belief.⁴ For instance, William Lane Craig states, “Apologetics... is that branch of Christian theology which seeks to provide a *rational justification* for the truth claims of the Christian faith” (Craig, 2008: 15, emphasis added). Similarly, Douglas Groothuis writes, “Christian apologetics is the *rational defense* of the Christian worldview as objectively true, rationally compelling and existentially or subjectively engaging” (Groothuis, 2011: 24, emphasis added). For contemporary apologists, then, demonstrating the rationality of Christian belief constitutes their discipline's *raison d'être* (see, for instance, Steven B. Cowan, 2000: 8; J. P. Moreland, 1987: 11; and R. C. Sproul, 2003: 13). Such apologists see such demonstration not simply as one goal among many at which their apologetic activities aim, but rather as the end toward which all such activities properly aim. In what follows, I suggest that, while such a construal of the apologist's task might be appropriate in a modern context, it is overly restrictive in a postmodern one. Apologists working in postmodern contexts thus need not construe their task solely—or even primarily—in terms of demonstrating the rationality of Christianity; in fact, effective apologetic ministry in such contexts not only permits but also requires a broader, more comprehensive vision of the apologist's task.

But whence comes such a vision? And what does it look like? Fortunately, it is not far to seek, arising—as it does—from the ancient Christian apologetic tradition; and it understands the apologist's task not as providing compelling arguments and convincing evidence but rather as painting a compelling portrait of the faith lived out. In the preceding argument, I provide a preliminary account of this vision. Before doing so, however, I seek first to motivate it.

I. Nietzsche and Reason's Descent

The postmodern turn presents apologists with a daunting challenge. For whatever separates various postmodern perspectives from one another,

4 Hereafter I refer to Christian apologists simply as “apologists”.

they speak with one voice concerning Enlightenment accounts of rationality (thus, what unites postmodernists is not what they *accept* but rather what they *reject*, see Jean-François Lyotard, 1984: xxiv, where he says: “Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives”). In so doing, they eschew such accounts, seeing them as overly optimistic about humanity’s ability to arrive at truth. Postmodernists take a skeptical view of knowledge, seeing truth in any objective sense as unattainable. Knowledge being beyond our kin, the best we can do is construct an account of the world which serves our purposes and, in light of that account, seek to make our lives beautiful by our own lights. I take this to be not only the point Nietzsche intends his work to make but also the end toward which he set himself (see Alexander Nehamas, 1985).

Modern apologists pursued their calling, appropriately enough, in accordance with the spirit of their age; and, of course, that meant defending the faith with arguments that carry weight with modernists. In short, such apologists trimmed their sails to the intellectual winds of the day, seeking to attract unbelievers with reasons they would find persuasive. As modernity has waned, however, the arguments and evidence useful for persuading a modern audience have become passé at best, counter-productive at worst. Having weighed modern accounts of rationality, postmodernists have found them wanting; naturally enough, then, they refuse to be impressed—much less persuaded—by apologetic strategies attuned to modern sensibilities.⁵ Such sophisticates see historic, orthodox Christianity as unattractive. It fails, as Nietzsche states, to satisfy their taste; and postmodernists need no further reason to reject it. So reject it they do.

Nietzsche himself lays the groundwork for postmodernity’s escape from reason by boldly proclaiming God’s death (Friedrich Nietzsche, 1977: 203).⁶ In so doing, he does not mean that God has literally died. For, of course, one cannot die unless one first exists; and on his view, God never existed in the first place. In proclaiming God’s death, then, Nietzsche makes a point not about God but rather about humanity: *we* can no longer reconcile God’s

5 Perhaps it will be suggested that the obvious path for contemporary apologists to take involves developing arguments that appeal to the postmodern conception of rationality. But, the question arises, which postmodernist? Whose conception of rationality should apologists target? For, of course, postmodernists present us not with a unified conception of rationality to which arguments can be tailored, but rather with a bewildering, fragmented array of such conceptions. In short, there simply is no “postmodern conception of rationality” in light of which apologists can do their work. This does *not*, however, signal “the end of apologetics” (see Myron Bradley Penner, 2013).

6 As Nietzsche sees it, God’s death leads to the dissolution of all traditional values, not just moral ones; as things go for good and evil, then, so also they go for rationality and irrationality.

existence with the world as we experience it; for us, “belief in the Christian God has become unbelievable” (Nietzsche, 1977: 208-9). According to Nietzsche, talk about God’s dying refers not to some deity’s actual demise but rather to our realization that no divine being ever existed in the first place.

But if God never existed, we ourselves have not been divinely created; and in that case, our lives have no divinely appointed purpose. We thus exist to no purpose; our lives lack meaning. Rather than pursuing destinies and fulfilling purposes established by a benevolent Creator, we find ourselves in a world marked by pointless pain and suffering, adrift on a sea of misery. God’s death makes orphans of us all; worse still, we become mere cogs in a dystopian machine.

As this suggests, Nietzsche sees the world as ugly. Indeed, if we were honest with ourselves about the world and our place in it, we could not bear it. “*Honesty*”, he tells us, “would bring disgust and suicide in its train” (Nietzsche, 1977: 131). According to legend, King Midas seizes the wood-god Silenus, forcing him to tell the king what is best and most excellent for humans. “Wretched, ephemeral race, children of chance and tribulation”, Silenus answers, “why do you force me to tell you the very thing which it would be most profitable for you *not* to hear? The very best thing is utterly beyond your reach [:] not to have been born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. However, the second best thing for you is: to die soon” (Friedrich Nietzsche, 1999, § 3: 22-23). “Once truth has been seen”, Nietzsche writes, “the consciousness of it prompts man to see only what is terrible or absurd in existence wherever he looks; now... he grasps the wisdom of the wood-god Silenus: he feels revulsion” (Friedrich Nietzsche, 1999, § 7: 40).

Fortunately, however, we have a means of coping. Art veils our eyes so that we do not despair; it makes our absurd, anguished, meaningless lives bearable by distracting us and obscuring truths which, if faced honestly, would debilitate us. It provides a “cult of the untrue” (Friedrich Nietzsche, 1977: 131), serving as a palliative for the truth. Beauty, *not* truth, thus saves us; indeed, beauty saves us *from* truth! “There is no pre-established harmony”, Nietzsche tells us, “between the furtherance of truth and the well-being of mankind” (Friedrich Nietzsche, 1977: 198). If our rational faculties help us survive, it is only because they lead us away from, rather than toward, truth.⁷

Despite all this, Nietzsche sees God’s death as cause for celebration rather than mourning. “We philosophers and ‘free spirits’”, he writes, “in fact feel at the news that the ‘old God is dead’ as if illumined by a new dawn; our heart overflows with gratitude...” (Friedrich Nietzsche, 1977: 209).

7 See Nietzsche, 1977: 198: “The irrationality of a thing is no argument against its existence, rather a condition of it.”

God's demise, it seems, is not debilitating but rather liberating. For it means we are no longer accountable. "The concept 'God'", he writes, "has hitherto been the greatest *objection* to existence... We deny God; in denying God, we deny accountability: only by doing *that* do we redeem the world" (Friedrich Nietzsche, 1990, § VI: 8, 54). With God dead, then, we are free to be our own masters, to be our own gods:

God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we, the murderers of all murderers, console ourselves? That which was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet possessed has bled to death under our knives—who will wipe this blood off us? With what water could we purify ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we need to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we not ourselves become gods simply to seem worthy of it? (Nietzsche, 1977: 203).

As this suggests, God's death provides an opportunity; it creates a void that Nietzsche invites us to fill. With God dead and the established moral order overthrown, we become painters with clean, fresh, white canvases. For us, anything is possible, *if only we have the courage and vision to fill the void, to apply the brush!*

Nietzsche thus calls us not only to stare the apparent meaninglessness of life full in the face without blinking, but also to embrace it. He gives us the clean, fresh, white canvases. But what shall we paint? Whatever we will, he says; whatever pleases us. And what will guide us? Not morality, for it has been overthrown; not reason, for it too has been overthrown. What then? Taste; yes, *taste* will be our guide. "As an aesthetic phenomenon existence is still *endurable* to us", Nietzsche writes, "and through art we are given eye and hand, and above all a good conscience, to *enable* us to make of ourselves such a phenomenon" (Nietzsche, 1977: 131). To embrace the meaninglessness of life and make for oneself a life beautiful by one's own lights—that is the task Nietzsche sets for those who, like him, have moved beyond modernity.

Now those intending to present the gospel as good news for postmodernists must find ways of attracting them that do not presuppose the modern epistemology they find wanting. In short, contemporary apologists must find ways of helping postmodernists see the faith as attractive, as beautiful and good.⁸ Plato long ago suggested that beauty, goodness and truth are inextricably linked. If this suggestion has merit—and I believe it does—then helping others see the beauty and goodness of the faith turns out to be

8 While the faith is in fact beautiful and good (as well as true), the apologist's task is not simply to assert—or even argue for—its beauty and goodness. Rather, her task is to help the unbeliever see it as such.

another way of helping them see its truth. In a postmodern world, moreover, aesthetic appeals—that is, appeals aimed at the aesthetic sensibilities or taste of one’s audience—are as likely to bring people to faith as rational ones. It is to an ancient apologist who, though a skilled philosopher, emphasizes not the faith’s rationality but rather its beauty that our discussion now turns.

II. Athenagoras and Beauty’s Ascent

Athenagoras of Athens writes *Embassy for the Christians* sometime between A.D. 176 and 180, approximately twenty-five to thirty years after the appearance of Justin Martyr’s two apologies. So cogent, elegant, and well-structured is his prose that noted patrologist Johannes Quasten describes Athenagoras as “unquestionably the most eloquent of the early Christian apologists” (Quasten, 1962, vol. 1: 229). He addresses his *Embassy* to Roman Emperors Marcus Aurelius Antoninus and Lucius Aurelius Commodus, to whom he appeals for justice on behalf of the Christian community. In making his appeal, Athenagoras responds to three charges that had been brought against that community: first, that Christians are atheists; second, that they practice cannibalism; and third, that they engage in incest.

The accusation of atheism apparently arose from the refusal of Christians to worship pagan gods or to participate in the religious rites of the cities in which they lived; and it is not surprising that literally-minded pagan observers misinterpreted the Eucharistic meal, participation in which involves Christians in symbolically eating the body and drinking the blood of their Lord, as cannibalistic. Moreover, both the practice of Christian couples referring to one another as “brother” and “sister” and Christian rhetoric encouraging radical love within the community were open to misunderstanding. So an uncomprehending pagan world’s misperceptions of the early church and the accusations to which those misperceptions gave rise need not surprise us. In response to those accusations, Athenagoras seeks to give his readers a clear, accurate picture of the community against which they had been brought. Here his strategy is obvious: by showing that they arise from mischaracterizations of Christian belief and practice, he hopes to deprive the accusations of their force.

After greeting the Emperors according to the custom of the day, Athenagoras assures them that he seeks only the justice extended to all their subjects. Such justice, he argues, has been denied Christians simply because of the name they bear.

We too, then, beg to enjoy this equity of yours towards all and not to be objects of hatred and castigation because we are called Christians—for what evil does our name produce by itself?—but to be judged for anything that anyone may lay to our account. Let us be discharged when we explain away the charges or let us

be punished if found to be guilty; not guilty of our name merely—for no Christian is wicked unless he play false to his profession—but guilty of a crime (Athenagoras, 1956: 31-32).

Athenagoras's words here echo Paul's in Acts 25:11, perhaps indicating a common theme in early Christian apology.

Of the three accusations, the first—the charge of atheism—receives the lion's share of Athenagoras's attention. In fact, though he devotes twenty-seven of the *Embassy's* thirty-seven chapters to rebutting that charge, the other two accusations together receive only six chapters' worth of attention. This does not mean, however, that Athenagoras views the two latter charges as less serious. Rather, he sees his response to the charge of atheism as making unnecessary a lengthy response to the other two charges. For, as will become apparent, elements of his response to the first charge apply *mutatis mutandis* to the second and third charges.

Athenagoras begins his response to the charge of atheism by arguing that Christian “doctrine introduces one God, creator of this world, Himself unbegotten (for it is not Being that is subject to Becoming, but not-Being), and says that all things are made by the Word that proceeds from Him...” (Athenagoras, 1956: 34). Against those who defined “atheism” not as the belief that there is no God but rather as the failure to acknowledge the pagan gods and take part in the rituals of one's community,⁹ Athenagoras points out the similarity between the Christian doctrine of God and the views of various Greek thinkers, most notably Plato, who were not seen as atheists. “If now Plato is no atheist, recognizing one unbegotten God as the maker of all things”, he states, “neither are we atheists, since we know and cherish that being as God by whose Word all things are made and by whose Spirit all things are held in being” (Athenagoras, 1956: 35). In addition to Plato, Athenagoras quotes two poets, Euripides and Sophocles, and cites Aristotle, the Stoics, and several Pythagoreans as all agreeing with the Christian view that there is only one God (Athenagoras, 1956: 34-37). Moreover, he argues, the Christian understanding of God turns out to be more solidly grounded than the views of these Greek thinkers because they arrived at their views by conjecture whereas Christians arrive at their view as a result of the Spirit working through the prophets (Athenagoras, 1956: 37).

Thus, Athenagoras sets before his readers the Christian view that there is only one God, the “creator of all this world”, and argues that it is similar—though superior—to the views of a number of well-respected Greek think-

9 “‘Atheism’ in the Roman empire was understood primarily as a refusal to recognize the gods of the ‘cities’ and to participate in the traditional rites” (see William R. Schoedel, “Introduction”, in Athenagoras, 1972: xiv).

ers. Having thus recommended to his readers the Christian view of the matter, he next sets out to undermine their confidence in the pagan alternative to that view. In so doing, he presents a sophisticated—though somewhat cumbersome—*reductio ad absurdum* argument against the view that there are two or more gods. With the view that there is only one God apparently established by argument, Athenagoras again turns his attention to Old Testament prophets, arguing that the Christian view rests ultimately upon the authority of the Spirit who speaks through those prophets “as a flautist might play upon his flute” (Athenagoras, 1956: 39).

Instructive, and perhaps surprising, is the fact that Athenagoras, described by one early church historian as a man who “became a Christian while he wore the philosopher’s cloak and was at the head of the Academy” (see Philip of Side, quoted by Schoedel, “Introduction”, in Athenagoras, 1972: ix), follows up the most sophisticated argument of his apology with an appeal to the work accomplished by the Spirit through the prophets. His point: “Consider this sophisticated argument for the truth of the Christian doctrine that there is only one God; but if that argument seems unconvincing, look to the prophets whose words are the guarantor of the faith’s truth.” According to Athenagoras, then, it is not the sophisticated argument which guarantees the truth of what the prophets say but rather the prophets’ voice—or, more precisely, the voice of the Spirit speaking through the prophets—which guarantees the truth of the conclusion reached by that argument.

The prophets proclaim, and Christians thus believe, that there is only one God (Athenagoras, 1956: 39-40). But while they believe there exists only one God, Christians also believe both that God has a Son, “Word of the Father in thought and power”, and that the prophetic Spirit is “an outflow from God, flowing out and returning like a ray of the sun” (Athenagoras, 1956: 40). “Who then”, Athenagoras asks, “would not be amazed hearing those called atheists who call God Father and Son and Holy Spirit, proclaiming their power in unity and in rank their diversity?” (Athenagoras, 1956: 40, 41)

So, in response to the first accusation, Athenagoras maintains that (1) Christians, like numerous Greek thinkers, believe in one God, (2) whom they call Father, Son, and Spirit, (3) the latter’s voice, having spoken through the prophets, providing the ultimate foundation for Christian doctrine, (4) though sophisticated arguments can be mustered to show the absurdity of pagan belief. But his response to the charge of atheism reaches its climax as Athenagoras shifts the focus away from the doctrine of God affirmed by Christians and toward their social teachings and practices.

By the dogmas to which we give assent, not man-made but divine and taught by God, we are able to persuade you that you have not to regard us as you would

atheists. What are those sayings on which we are brought up? I shall tell you: *Love your enemies; bless them that curse you; pray for them that persecute you, that you may be the children of your Father who is in heaven, who maketh His sun to rise upon the good and the bad, and raineth upon the just and the unjust* (Athenagoras, 1956: 41).

Who among the philosophers, Athenagoras asks, teaches such things? Who among them loves his enemies? Or blesses those who despise him? Or prays for those who seek to harm him? Do not the pagan philosophers lack the purity of heart to live as the humblest Christian lives? (Athenagoras, 1956: 41-42).¹⁰

Yet, within the Christian community, one finds genuine magnanimity—true greatness of soul—where one least expects it.

But amongst us you might find simple folk, artisans and old women, who, if they are unable to furnish in words the assistance they derive from our doctrine, yet show in their deeds the advantage to others that accrues from their resolution. They do not rehearse words but show forth good deeds; struck, they do not strike back, plundered, they do not prosecute; to them that ask they give, and they love their neighbors as themselves (Athenagoras, 1956: 42).

So, as he brings to its climax his primary line of defense for the authenticity of Christian belief in God, Athenagoras appeals neither to sophisticated arguments nor to doctrines which would surely seem obscure to pagan minds. Instead, he appeals to the nobility of those whose lives are shaped by their Christian commitments. Thus, as he sees it, the ultimate test of authenticity for Christian commitment—as well as the final vindication of Christian belief—lies in the *power of the gospel* to ennoble those within the Christian community to lives of extraordinary goodness.¹¹ Not only does the love which characterizes the church mark her off as Christ's community, but it also serves as the final defense of the truth of the faith which she confesses.¹²

Before turning his attention to the other two accusations, Athenagoras anticipates objections likely to be raised against his response to the charge of atheism. Against those who think that Christians' unwillingness to make sacrifices shows them to be atheists, he argues that—though God, being perfect, needs no burnt offerings—Christians offer to him “a bloodless sacrifice, our reasonable service” (Athenagoras, 1956: 44).¹³ Moreover, since pagans themselves disagree from city to city about which gods to worship, Chris-

10 Although he does not make the point explicitly, Athenagoras's discussion of pagan gods suggests that they, like pagan philosophers, live far less virtuously than the lowliest Christian.

11 Cf. Romans 1:16-17.

12 Cf. John 13:31-35; 1 John 3:11-24.

13 Cf. Romans 12:1.

tians' failure to worship any particular city's gods does not make them atheists (Athenagoras, 1956: 44-45). In defense of the refusal to worship statues of the gods, Athenagoras argues that the statues—like the gods they represent—had a beginning in time and thus are not divine (Athenagoras, 1956: 49-51). While these statues might appear to manifest divine power, such appearances result from demonic activity (Athenagoras, 1956: 59-63).

Having emphasized the moral virtue of the Christian community in responding to the first accusation, Athenagoras deals with the other two accusations in relatively short order. For, he states, "I know that by what I have already said I have fully cleared myself; for you will realize, being without peers in wisdom, that those whose life has God for its rule will never come even to conceive the idea of the least transgression" (Athenagoras, 1956: 72). In response to the second accusation, he argues that Christian belief in both eternal life and eternal judgment ensures that Christians would not engage in cannibalism (Athenagoras, 1956: 72-73). Moreover, though cannibalism typically involves murder, Christians "are known to be unwilling to countenance even lawful homicide" such as occurs in the gladiatorial contests sponsored by the Emperors themselves (Athenagoras, 1956: 75-76). In response to the third accusation, Athenagoras notes the irony of Christians being falsely accused of, and persecuted for, activities in which the pagan gods engage with impunity (Athenagoras, 1956: 73). Their commitment to sexual purity makes charges that Christians engage in incest absurd.

But so far are we removed from promiscuity that it is not allowed us even to look with passion upon another; for, as Scripture says, *he that shall look on a woman to lust after her, hath already committed adultery with her in his heart*. God made our eyes to be a light to us, and we may not use them otherwise. For us a wanton glance is adultery, seeing that our eyes are made for a different purpose, and we are judged for what is no more than a thought. How then could such as ourselves fail to enjoy a reputation for chastity? (Athenagoras, 1956: 73)

Athenagoras closes the *Embassy* with a final plea as well as a pledge on behalf of the church both to pray for the Emperors and to live quiet, peaceable, and obedient lives (Athenagoras, 1956: 78).

Rather than emphasizing the faith's rationality, Athenagoras emphasizes the goodness of Christian social practices and the beauty of the believing community's life together. While one might construe his emphasis on such goodness and beauty in evidentiary terms—as rational evidence for Christianity's truth—such a construal seems strained. Certainly, Athenagoras's primary interest lies not in demonstrating the faith's rationality—much less its truth—but rather in correcting his unbelieving audience's misunderstandings of the faith. In so doing, he invites closer scrutiny of individual believers in particular and of the church in general. While the testimony of

the “simple folk” whom the church comprises cannot equal the rhetoric of pagan philosophers when it comes to eloquence, the lives of such folk nonetheless outshine the lives of those philosophers; however impressive the arguments of the philosophers may be, especially when compared to the testimony of the church’s “artisans and old women”, more impressive still is the Spirit-filled community’s life. As Athenagoras and other early Christian apologists see it, then, the beauty and goodness of the faith lived out serve as its ultimate vindication.

III. Denouement

In important respects, the situation in which apologists now find themselves resembles that of their ancient forebears. Like Athenagoras, contemporary apologists work within a radically pluralistic culture, one in which numerous religious perspectives compete. Such radical pluralism “triggers the commonly heard response that one religion or set of values is as good as any other” (Dennis Hollinger, in Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, 1995: 185). Like their ancient forebears, then, today’s apologists work in contexts in which Christianity is seen as simply one tradition among many equally legitimate ones; and for the most part, their unbelieving contemporaries see Christians as out of sync with themselves and their values. Moreover, just as Athenagoras’s pagan contemporaries misunderstood Christianity, so too most of those living in the West today “know scarcely anything about the Christian faith” (John G. Stackhouse, Jr., in Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, 1995: 49), though they think otherwise. So contemporary apologists, like ancient ones, must concern themselves with correcting unbelievers’ misunderstandings of the faith as much as with commending it to them.

Conclusions

One must not fail to commend the faith in ways that speak to unbelievers. Given the culture’s postmodern turn, moreover, many unbelievers eschew not only the truth of the gospel but also the very notion of truth itself. Postmodernists no longer judge between competing religions on the basis of arguments and evidence; rather, as if following Nietzsche’s cue, taste has become their guide. What constitutes an effective apology in such a context? How does one commend the gospel to a culture that sees personal preference as more relevant than evidence in judging between competing religious views? Is defense even possible in such a setting?

We suggest that contemporary apologists respond to the brave, new world in which they find themselves by embracing a broader, more comprehensive vision of their task. More specifically, I suggest that they embrace what might be called an “ancient-future” apologetic vision, one both

informed by early Christian apology and committed to commending the faith on the basis not only of rationality but also of beauty and goodness. Such a vision cannot guarantee success; unbelievers can always refuse to see Christianity's beauty and goodness even as they refuse to see its truth. Our aesthetic sensitivities are no more immune to the Fall's effects than our rational faculties are. But in an era when aesthetic concerns trump rational ones, apologetic appeals need to be made not only on the basis of reason but also of beauty and goodness.

References

- Athenagoras. *Embassy for the Christians, the Resurrection of the Dead*. Translated by Joseph Hugh Crehan. Ancient Christian Writers, 23. Edited by Johannes Quasten and Joseph C. Plumpe. New York, NY: Newman, 1956.
- Athenagoras. *Legatio and De Resurrectione*. Edited and translated by William R. Schoedel. Oxford Early Christian Texts. Edited by Henry Chadwick. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1972.
- Cowan, Steven B. *Five Views on Apologetics*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000.
- Craig, William Lane. *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*. 3rd Edition. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008.
- Groothuis, Douglas. *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2011.
- Luther, Martin. *The Table-Talk of Martin Luther*. Translated by William Hazlitt. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Philadelphia, PA: The Lutheran Publication Society, 2004.
- Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Theory and History of Literature, vol. 10. Edited by Wlad Godzich and Jochen Schulte-Sasse. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- Moreland, James Porter. *Scaling the Secular City: A Defense of Christianity*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1987.
- Nehamas, Alexander. *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*. Translated by Ronald Speirs. Edited by Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs. Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Gay Science*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1974.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *A Nietzsche Reader*. Translated by R. J. Hollingdale. New York, NY: Penguin, 1977.

- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Twilight of the Idols and the Anti-Christ*. Translated by R. J. Hollingdale. New York, NY: Penguin, 1990.
- Pascal, Blaise. *Pensées and Other Writings*. Translated by Honor Levi. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Penner, Myron Bradley. *The End of Apologetics: Christian Witness in a Postmodern Context*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2013.
- Phillips, Timothy R., and Dennis L. Okholm, eds. *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995.
- Quasten, Johannes. *Patrology*, vol. 1: *The Beginnings of Patristic Literature*. Westminster, MD: Newman, 1962.
- Sproul, Robert Charles. *Defending Your Faith: An Introduction to Apologetics*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003.