

Apologetics - the Pride of Place in the Christian Spiritual Life?

By Scuter Koo

Background

I was first introduced to apologetics several years ago through the ministry of Ravi Zacharias. At the time, I was astounded that the Christian faith could be rationally defended even in the secular marketplace of ideas. However, I quickly realized that Ravi's method of defending the faith was not easily replicable, and I then discovered the ministry of William Lane Craig at Reasonable Faith. Now this was a methodology of apologetics that I could mimic, even if somewhat rudimentarily. The arguments were clear and distinct, with specified premises leading to a conclusion that was logically airtight. Step one, step two, BOOM! Therefore, God exists. What a treat it was!

In the following years I delved deeper into the many more arguments that other Christian philosophers had developed; arguments from consciousness, from reason, from beauty, from numbers, even an argument that you don't need arguments. The more I researched, the more enthralled I became. Not only could the faith be defended in the secular marketplace, it was being defended at the highest levels of academia! I felt like God had placed me atop the shoulders of intellectual giants and my faith received such a tremendous boost!

As I pursued my graduate degree in philosophy (as will become apparent in the rest of this essay) at Talbot, I started to realize that something was a little off about my then-view of apologetics. Unbeknownst to me, apologetics had come to occupy pride of place in my Christian life. I was all about the arguments and defending the faith. What was wrong with that? After all, we're instructed to love God with "all our mind"! Oh, how often I used that command to guilt fellow unreflective brothers and sisters for not being interested in apologetics and the rational defense of their faith. Clearly, not everyone is called to be a Ravi Zacharias or a William Lane Craig. So just what is the place of apologetics in the spiritual life?

The Christian Spiritual Life

But first, what is the Christian life fundamentally about anyway? You just need to walk into any evangelical church today, throw a stone and the first person it hits will tell you, "Christianity is not a religion; it's a relationship." But like all overused phrases, that statement had lost all meaning to me in my hunger to learn more about apologetics. At what point is a person saved? Does he have to mentally assent to certain propositional truths (core doctrines/beliefs)? Granted, he can't reject certain beliefs, but does he have to hold them positively? (A person can't, for instance, reject the existence of God and still be properly called a Christian, I think). But what about the Trinity? The Incarnation? The substitutionary atonement? Does one have to have positive beliefs about all of these to be saved?

Here is my take about what it means to say that Christianity is not a religion but a relationship. The thought is that "being saved" is not so much a function of cognitive assent to

certain propositional beliefs. Rather, it is about the relational acceptance of a person. The primary question is, “Do you know Jesus?” (Matt. 7:23).

But what does it take to “know Jesus”? The mere acknowledgment of his existence, just like my acknowledgement that “I know Donald Trump exists”? Surely not. Of course there was a sense of “knowing” that the people Jesus rebuked had. They knew Jesus existed because they casted out demons and performed miracles in his name. So what is Jesus referring to? I believe our Lord is referring to the “knowing of persons”. This is a different kind of “knowing” from “acknowledgment of existence” or cognitive assent. This is a relationally-loaded epistemological concept that entails not just mere cognitive assent, but a deep *personal acquaintance*.

Knowing Jesus as an essentially non-propositional reality

Knowledge by acquaintance is a concept that everyone is familiar with, yet notoriously difficult to pin down and analyze. We can all intuitively tell the difference between “I know Donald Trump” and “I know my best friend”. The word “know” is being used in different senses in both phrases. The latter one refers to a deeper reality than the former. There is a sense that you have some kind of privileged knowledge about the person that not everyone else does or can have. It is uniquely *your* knowledge of this person. Someone else could know your best friend as well, but it would not be in the same way that you do. You could even make a case that you know your best friend better than others.

But are there really these two different forms of “knowing”? Might not what I call “knowledge by acquaintance” really just be the possession of extensive propositional knowledge? The real difference between “I know Donald Trump” and “I know my best friend” is just that I know more true propositions about my best friend than I do about Donald Trump. I know how my best friend would react in more scenarios than the Donald would, for instance. So the worry is that knowledge by acquaintance is ultimately reducible to propositional knowledge.

What to make of this worry? While it is certainly true that I might possess more propositional knowledge of my best friend than the Donald, I don’t think that is what adequately captures the difference between the two statements of knowing. After all, I think it is entirely possible to gain knowledge of a person even when you don’t know much about them. Think about the certain kinds of first meetings that you have had with a friend of a friend. Imagine that’s the first time your friend introduced the both of you and so you have no propositional knowledge about that person. But once you start talking, you immediately hit it off and feel very comfortable with that person. In fact, you feel more comfortable and at peace with that new person than you do with some friends that you’ve had for 10 years and have more propositional knowledge of. Does it make sense to say that you “know” this new friend more/better than that other old friend of 10 years? I think it does.

As such, I think that knowing Jesus is an essentially non-propositional reality. It is just like knowing any other person. It cannot be ‘captured’ by mere propositional statements. It’s the kind of “you just had to be there” occasions. When you’re introduced for the first time, you can say, “I know him” on an intellectual-assenting level. But you don’t *really* know him, at least in the sense that

I think Jesus is referring to in Matt. 7. There is a deeper reality to knowing Jesus than just being told about him and convinced that he exists as a person.

The place of Apologetics in the Spiritual Life

What then, is the domain of Christian apologetics? Apologetics and philosophy deal primarily with propositions. “Truth” is defined by many philosophers to be a property of propositions, or at any rate intrinsically linked to propositions. After all, it doesn’t make sense to say, “That rock is true”, or “That person is true”. Truth is about propositional assertions; “God exists”, “Jesus is the son of God”, “Jesus rose from the dead”, etc. And yet, the Bible gives us the seemingly absurd claim that Truth is a person, Jesus. To any philosopher, this is clearly a category fallacy. How can a person be Truth?

This is where I believe philosophy and apologetics break down; when we deal with the God of the universe and the creator of all reality. The Bible is replete with affirmations about Jesus being the truth (John 14:6), commands to walk in the truth (John 8:31-32), assurances that God will lead us to truth (John 16:13), etc. To know Jesus is to know truth. The person who has zero knowledge of apologetics and Christian philosophy can still know truth. Why? Because he can still know the person of Jesus. He can know him by acquaintance. Jesus is able to meet with anyone and everyone whosoever seeks him. Are the mentally handicapped able to know Jesus? In my view, you bet! Because the spiritual life is not *primarily* about the mastery of propositional truth.

If this all makes sense, then apologetics is in a pretty awkward position. Why? Because it is an inherently propositional enterprise. Apologists deal primarily with propositions, but their task is to point outside of itself toward a non-propositional reality; the reality of knowing the person of Jesus. I say this because I myself fell into the trap years ago of thinking that apologetics and defending the faith was one of the highest callings of the Christian life. I knew much about Jesus, but even as my propositional knowledge about the incarnation, the trinity, the atonement grew, my personal knowledge of Jesus did not. It led to a deep misapprehension and gross overestimation of where I was in the spiritual life. I’ve since come to respect especially the spiritual narratives of older Christians, especially ones who have no knowledge of apologetics, some even hostile to it. For many of them, apologetics is absurd because they have that knowledge by acquaintance. What is there need for argument that Jesus exists after you have actually met him in your life and circumstances? I chuckle to myself each time I think about how my 90+ year old grandmother would react if I tried explaining the point of the cosmological or moral argument to her. “Silly boy”, she must think to herself, and in a sense she’s right. I believe Jesus has salvific resources at his disposal that are way beyond our finite human imagination or comprehension.

A way forward for apologists

Is apologetics irrelevant then? I don’t think so. I agree with much of what Ravi and Craig propound about the importance of shaping culture in such a way that the Christian worldview is intellectually defensible, maybe even (dare I say) superior to other worldviews. I do think that is only the loving thing to do as the salt and light of the world. However, apologists and philosophers alike

should not be deluded into thinking that they hold the “keys to the kingdom” and knowledge of God. I believe that true knowledge of God does not consist in the mastery of arguments/doctrine. The deception and temptation is subtle, but very real. Ultimately, apologetics is a ministry of loving someone into the kingdom by carefully addressing intellectual barriers or doubts. At heart, all final rejection of God is a moral issue and not an intellectual one. Apologists need to keep that in perspective. The task of the apologist is to work with the intellectual arguments and objections and, in tandem with the Holy Spirit, lay the skeptic’s heart bare before himself. Once the heart is laid bare, the option of a meeting with the person of Jesus is presented, and an invitation to a new kind of life in the kingdom of heaven extended. It is not to convince them that Christianity is true or (God forbid) get them to utter a scripted “sinner’s prayer” after mercilessly destroying all their objections and leaving them speechless.

“But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander” (1 Peter 3:15-16). As a budding young apologist/philosopher, I loved the “always be prepared to give an answer” bit, but I largely ignored the rest. Now, about five years into my philosophical journey, I think “the rest” is way more important than the apologetics. The strength and credibility of one’s apologetic is intrinsically tied to one’s formation in Christ. The two cannot be separated. For all our propositional knowledge of arguments, how well do we really *know* Jesus?