

THE GOSPELS AND APOLOGETIC METHOD

From our seminary days most of us are familiar with an apologetics course constructed on approximately the following lines. The Christian religion is to be believed because its founder is the Incarnate Son of God. His divine Sonship is shown by the fact that he claimed this status and proved his claims by his miracles, especially his glorious resurrection. The reality of these claims and miracles, in turn, is demonstrated from the gospels considered as purely historical documents. To establish the historicity of the gospels, a presupposition of the whole argument, an introductory course *De Evangeliiis* is given. It aims to prove that the gospels are strictly historical works, whose authors were competent and truthful (*scientes et veraces*) since they were either Apostles or close associates of Apostles.

This apologetic is notable for its simplicity, orderliness, and objectivity. The subject to whom the demonstration is addressed is the detached, unprejudiced inquirer, seeking to answer the purely historical question, who and what did Jesus show himself to be? The method is predominantly that of scientific, or academic, history, and the primary materials to which the method is applied are the gospels, considered as merely historical sources. The proximate term to which the investigation concludes is the claims and miracles of Jesus, and from these, in turn, are deduced Jesus' divine authority and consequently the divine origin of the Christian religion. The judgment of credibility goes out to the person of the historical Jesus, and is expressed in a readiness to accept whatever religion he taught.

In spite of the wide favor enjoyed by this apologetic demonstration during the generation 1910-40, it now seems seriously in need of amendment. Many difficulties might be mentioned, but I shall here limit myself to two—the first pertaining to the nature of scientific history, the other to the nature of the gospels as sources.

The apologetic we have considered is committed to the use of factual, scientific history, of the sort used by secular historians,

especially those associated with the German historico-critical school. This method prescind as far as possible from questions of theory and value, which are regarded as "non-historicable," and aims to recover verifiable facts. For this reason, however, it cannot cope with the problem of the miraculous. Miracles, in the view of most contemporary theologians, can rarely if ever be discerned without attention to their value as religious signs. A scientific demonstration of a divine intervention is impossible because, in the perspectives of science, such an event is not a proximate possibility of the type that science must reckon with. The pure historian, confronted with reports of apparent anomalies, will do his best, through historical criticism, to reduce them to naturally possible occurrences. He will appeal to error, legend, hallucination, and the like, and if all these expedients fail to dispose of the case, he will say simply that it is one of those things which as a historian he cannot account for. The pure historian, then, cannot by his method conclude to the reality of Jesus' miracles. For this reason, if no other, there can be no strictly historical demonstration of his divine authority.

The second major difficulty has to do with the nature of the gospels. They will appear to the scientific historian, trained in the techniques of the historico-critical school, to be far from ideal sources. He will feel that the competence and candor of the evangelists is not beyond question. Their competence will seem suspect because the gospels were not written till a generation or two after the events they relate, and the previous vicissitudes of the tradition are extremely hard to trace. Their candor will be questioned because the evangelists write as believers, committed to a cause, with the avowed aim of arousing faith and devotion in the reader. The scientific historian will therefore conclude that it is impossible to reconstruct the claims and deeds of Jesus with sufficient certitude and precision to be able to draw the conclusions which the standard apologetics manuals propose.

The contemporary apologist, perceiving the weaknesses of the foregoing apologetic, must seriously ask himself: can one construct a viable apologetic on the basis of the New Testament, or must apologetics seek some other ground? In my brochure, *Apologetics*

and the Biblical Christ,¹ I take the position that the New Testament does offer impressive evidence for Christian credibility, and hence that it can be effectively used in apologetics. But I am not at all sure that we can fashion a new type of demonstration as simple, lucid, and orderly as that which we have just analyzed.

The apologetic which I advocate is addressed not to the dispassionate, scientific historian but to the religious inquirer. By a religious inquirer I mean a man personally concerned with the credibility of revelation. He may be a believer, seeking to know the rational grounds of his faith, or an unbeliever, seeking to discover whether God has revealed Himself. As Newman pointed out, the amount of positive evidence needed in the case of a given individual will vary considerably according to his antecedent predispositions with regard to accepting a divine revelation. But for any discernment of the signs of revelation I should suppose that the inquirer must be convinced that revelation is not manifestly impossible and that, if given, it would be a positive blessing.

The sincere inquirer, looking into the New Testament, will ask, does the religion set forth in these books bear the marks of an authentic revelation? The central affirmation of the New Testament is that Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified one, is Messiah and Lord of the universe (cf. Acts 2:36). But it is remarkable that the New Testament makes no real effort to prove this astounding assertion. Rather, it treats the matter as something beyond proof. The apostles, and the evangelists in their train, speak as witnesses appointed by God; they ask the reader to accept their testimony.

The older apologetic unduly neglected the role of authoritative human testimony in providing a natural basis for the credibility of the word of God. According to scholastic epistemology, which I find eminently acceptable on this point, human testimony is a distinct font of knowledge. It does not proffer intrinsic evidence, and is therefore irreducible to scientific induction or deduction. The witness may give evidence that he was in a position to find out, or that what he says is not absurd, but in the last analysis he asks his hearers

¹ Westminster: The Newman Press, 1963.

to rely on his word as the ultimate basis for their assent. He presents himself as one to whom a privileged insight has been entrusted and who has been faithful to his charge of handing it on. He speaks not as a neutral observer but as a committed man, personally involved in the reality which he affirms. He acts, moreover, in full responsibility, in the presence, so to speak, of transcendence. For this reason, attestation is generally associated with the taking of an oath. The witness is conscious, too, that his message has value, that it "makes a difference." To refuse to accept his word will not only cut one off from communion with him; it will debar one from entering into the enriching spiritual experience which he desires to share with others.

To provide a theoretical justification for the act of human faith is no easy matter. This very complicated area of epistemology has engaged the attention of contemporary philosophers such as Gabriel Marcel, August Brunner, and Carlos Cirne-Lima. In line with these thinkers, I am inclined to hold that some kind of intuitive awareness of a pre-conceptual type is involved here. This depends, in part, upon the dynamic drive of man's intellect to union with the absolute, and no doubt also upon the dynamism of a free decision governed by an affective attitude toward the witness as a person.² Personal faith would be an epistemological monstrosity in the perspectives of Cartesian rationalism and Lockean empiricism, but perhaps modern personalist and existential philosophers may be on the track of a better solution. The application of this type of approach to the New Testament will have to be worked out slowly, through the cooperative efforts of philosophers, exegetes, and theologians, bearing in mind the special features of the biblical testimony—such as its predominantly communal or collective character, and the limited access to the apostolic witnesses afforded by the New Testament writings.

The idea that the faith of human witnesses plays a vital role in establishing the credibility of the Christian revelation is by no

² These points are explained in the light of contemporary German Scholasticism by G. A. McCool, S.J., "The Primacy of Intuition," *Thought* 37 (1962) 57-73.

means new. St. Thomas explicitly recognized that "fides patrum est nobis medium inducens ad credendum."³ Many modern apologists have stressed the role of the living Church as a potent witness to Christ. "Her preaching," writes Karl Adam,⁴ "prepares the way for my faith in Jesus. Her testimony becomes in that measure a motive of credibility, as the School expresses it, but is not yet a true motive of faith. It gives me human faith, a certitude which is not yet absolute, which is still frail."

If this be true of the contemporary Church, we may legitimately raise the question whether the testimony of the primitive Church, as contained in the New Testament, does not have a somewhat similar value. An affirmative answer is suggested by even the most cursory examination of the Bible itself. The biblical writers, as Father David Stanley has noted, are almost totally unconcerned with proof. In place of proof, they give authoritative testimony.

Even where there is question of the existence of God, the sacred authors, while providing abundant testimony to the existence of the one, true God of Israel, are nowhere concerned to prove His existence. Consequently, with regard to Christ's resurrection, one would look in vain to the apostolic preachers for any proof of the fact. On the other hand, they are constantly asserting that it is their business to attest its reality. The transcendent superiority of testimony over proof may be gauged by the fact that, while proof compels the assent of reason only, testimony demands an *engagement* of the whole man, mind, heart, and above all, will. For this reason, the term proof has never formed part of the biblical vocabulary of salvation, whilst testimony is a key word in the soteriologies of both OT and NT. It is by testimony, the kerygma, not by proof, as Paul reminds us, "that God has been pleased to save those who have faith" (1 Cor 1,21).⁵

If we bear in mind that the New Testament writers have no intention of proving the reality of Jesus' claims and miracles we shall not be scandalized at the alleged weakness of the evidence

³ *De ver.* q. 14, a. 2, ad 9.

⁴ *The Spirit of Catholicism*, New York: Macmillan, 1929, p. 58.

⁵ "The Concept of Salvation in Primitive Christian Preaching," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 18 (1956) 248.

which they adduce. The Bible gives us an authoritative declaration of what God has revealed to the Church through Jesus and his Holy Spirit. It aims to present in a vivid and compelling way the good news which God has made known through the Incarnation and glorification of His Son. The highly colored, theologically interpreted portrait of Jesus we find in the gospels is, in its way, as true as—or rather yet truer than—a mere photograph of his external features and behavior. The witness of the New Testament is not merely factual; it goes directly to the theological meaning of Jesus' words and deeds. This means that the apologist who relies on that testimony need not be overly preoccupied with sifting fact from interpretation—a process crucial to the older apologetic. The entire proclamation of the New Testament—including the Acts and epistles no less than the gospels—is available to the apologist. All of it resounds with the same glorious faith.

To avoid gullibility the prudent inquirer will have to ask himself whether the testimony of the early Church is credible. Can we prudently believe that the apostles encountered in Jesus the very revelation of God? The apologist must seek to show that the Church's affirmation is, on the human level, worthy of belief. It has the qualities which recommend it as reliable testimony, and is, in fact, something of a miracle. While the argument cannot be developed here, I would suggest that it might be formulated in terms of the content of the message, the manner of its proclamation, and the mode of its origin.

As regards the content, the New Testament has proved its power to give spiritual strength to a widely diversified portion of mankind over many centuries. It has raised up great religious figures, inspiring them with a coherent vision of life and with pure devotion to the service of God and man. The gospels have brought men to the purest love of God and self-forgetfulness. After meditating on the New Testament message one can say only that if this is not revelation, God has not yet revealed Himself to man.

The way in which the Christian message is heralded in the New Testament confirms the hypothesis of revelation. It is proclaimed with extraordinary unanimity, conviction, joy, and spiritual power.

The bearers of the Christian tidings, including the New Testament writers themselves, give evidence of extraordinary enthusiasm and fortitude. It seems obvious that, far from having invented the message by their own ingenuity, they were transformed into new men by the tidings which they bore.

Finally, the origin of the new faith is suitably attributed to revelation. All efforts to reduce it to some combination of previously existing religious movements have proved weak and unsuccessful. While we cannot accurately reconstruct every stage in the process, it is undeniable that Christianity took shape as a distinct religion in Palestine, in the first generation, under the vigilance of the apostles. Although we may admit some external influences on the manner in which the new faith was formulated and proclaimed to the gentiles, there is every reason to accept the biblical testimony that the message itself was derived from the apostles' association with the earthly Jesus, completed and crowned by the supernatural experiences of Easter and Pentecost. Our Lord appears on the pages of the gospels as a very distinct, inimitable individual, of a type that cannot be plausibly ascribed to myth or legend. For the disciples to have followed him as they did, and to have retained so vivid an impression of his person and doctrine, he must have spoken and acted substantially as described. And if so, he must have manifested to them his divine Lordship.

Once the hypothesis of revelation has been rendered plausible by considerations such as these, some of the historical materials used in the older apologetic may be utilized. The quality of Jesus' earthly career is important as lending credibility to the apostles' affirmation that he was more than a wandering rabbi or prophet. Although we cannot accurately reconstruct his miracles by the methods of academic history, there is impressive evidence that his followers and enemies were alike convinced of his thaumaturgic powers. If we cannot be sure of the precise terms in which he referred to his person and function—though I see no reason to deny that he designated himself as Son of Man—the traditions unanimously portray him as speaking and acting with sovereign authority, so as to imply that God's Kingdom was becoming present in his very person. The stories

of the empty tomb and the post-resurrection appearances may be hard to weave into a connected narrative, but they do not for that reason lose their value as indications of the way in which the Church became convinced that Jesus had risen in the flesh and was exalted to the right hand of God.

The older apologetic undertook to demonstrate that the verifiable facts admitted no other interpretation than that which the apostles placed upon them. I doubt whether "presuppositionless history" can prove so much. But there is a striking convergence in the traditions. From all indications, Jesus must have spoken and acted in an extraordinary way and given rise to religious experiences of incomparable power. While we cannot rigorously demonstrate that the apostles placed the right interpretation on Jesus' career, we can safely say that there are many signs which make that interpretation credible. The ultimate decision to accept the Church's testimony, like any other decision regarding human testimony, must be a highly personal one, not strictly dictated by the probative force of the evidence.

The apologetic of the current manuals proceeds by a simple linear logic in which the various links in the argument would be successively established, one after the other. Pure history, unfortified by religious insight, is considered sufficient to establish the divine claims of Jesus and his prodigious deeds. By arguing from these premises in the light of undeniable first principles, it is considered possible to ascertain that Jesus was in fact the Son of God.

For the simplicity of this argument we must now substitute—as I contend—a logic which is more complicated but which perhaps corresponds more nearly to the spontaneous movement of the human mind. The lines of evidence intertwine, mutually corroborating one another. To approach the judgment of credibility, the mind must encircle the whole field of evidence, and gradually "zero in" upon the target. If there were no reason to look on Jesus as claiming to speak in God's name, it would be hard to believe that his career should have been signalized by astounding miracles or that he himself should have risen from the dead. And conversely, if he gave no such proofs of power, we should have grounds to question whether he would have demanded such unwavering faith in his own person.

Nor is it possible to isolate our consideration of Christ from the perspectives of salvation history. The fact that Jesus stands at the religious climax of the history of Israel and at the fountain-head of a new world religion of unequalled vitality gives reason to suspect that he must have been a most singular person. The joyful conviction with which his disciples professed that he was indeed the Messiah of Israel and the Lord of all creation invites us to enter into their faith. In a balanced apologetic, therefore, word and deed, Christ and Church, historical fact and religious value all mutually converge to sustain a single judgment of credibility.

Making due allowance for the mutual priorities involved in the inquiry, one may say that in a true sense the primary sign of credibility in the apologetic here outlined is the testimony of the apostolic Church. It is, so to speak, the focal point upon which the prior history of Israel converges and from which all subsequent faith takes its rise. Through the testimony of the Church, and in no other way, we have solid access to the facts concerning Jesus and to the meaning of his appearance among men. If this be true, our decision about Jesus will necessarily involve a definite stand toward the Church as the bearer of his message. A valid Christian apologetic must therefore be, at least in some vague and inchoative sense, Catholic as well. But its full Catholicity will emerge only as we expand our horizons and discern that the living Church of our own time continues to exhibit the same essential traits as the Church of the New Testament. To justify this assertion would obviously take us beyond our present theme.

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