

# **A New Apologetics: Speaking of God in a world troubled by Religion**

Canon Professor Elaine Graham

2016 Chester Cathedral Lecture

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## 1. Introduction: (Not) Coming to a Cinema near you



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vlUXh4mx4gI#action=share>

This is a one minute video of various people, including a wedding couple, a body-builder, a farmer, a Gospel choir and the Archbishop of Canterbury, reciting the Lord's Prayer. It was made as part of a Church of England campaign entitled "Just Pray"<sup>2</sup> and was released to coincide with the run-up to Christmas, with screenings tabled to accompany the long-awaited release of the new *Star Wars* instalment.

You may be one of the 200,000 who viewed it online in the first week of its release in November 2015 (and over 770,000 have watched it to date). The one place you won't have seen it, which is where it was intended to be seen, is in any of the major cinemas around the UK. For the company responsible for placing advertisements in cinemas,

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<sup>1</sup> Today's lecture is based on the Didsbury Lectures delivered at the Nazarene Theological College, Manchester in October 2015 [archived at <http://original.livestream.com/ntcmanchester>] An expanded version of this series will be published by Wipf and Stock publishers in 2017.

<sup>2</sup> #JustPray [<http://www.justpray.uk/>]

Digital Cinema Media, announced that it would not be showing the film, even though a British Board of Film Classification certificate had been issued and despite, at an earlier stage of negotiations with the Church, DCM offering a substantial discount in advertising rates.<sup>3</sup>

So what was going on? Why the discomfort around religious belief and practice? Was it, as some people claimed, part of a cultural persecution of Christianity? Or a failure of religious literacy: people simply no longer have the measure of religion, and so cinema-goers no longer know how to ask, What is happening here? Is this normal? Might this cause offence? and – perhaps most importantly - how do *I*, the viewer, feel about this?

Or possibly, DCM felt that if they allowed an advert from one religious group – even if it didn't appear to be harming anyone – in the future there might come an approach from a group judged to be more 'offensive' or 'dangerous'. But then, how are we to judge between what is 'good' religion and what is 'bad' when we know so little about it? Back to religious literacy again.

## **2. A World Troubled by Religion**

So our cinema ad that never was is perhaps one example of the way in which contemporary Western societies are uncomfortable around religious faith. But of course these days there are many far less innocuous examples of what happens when religion erupts into public life and onto our streets, public buildings and our news media. It is only

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-34891928>

a year since the people of Paris were reeling from the attacks on *Charlie Hebdo* magazine in early January 2015, supposedly as a reprisal for its scurrilous portrayal of Islam; followed then in November in attacks on the Bataclan theatre and other venues. But even since the beginning of 2016, we have seen violence in Burkina Faso, Jakarta and Istanbul, apparently as the result of actions by insurgents from Daesh, or the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

These are manifestations of the unexpected (at least to many Western eyes) resurgence of religion as a global political and cultural force. But to present this simply as a clash of civilizations, or a polarization, between the secular 'West' and the religious 'rest' is to misunderstand. It is an altogether more agonistic and paradoxical situation, in which newly-visible and resurgent religion co-exists with other dimensions of decline and marginalization, exacerbated by continuing resistance to forms of religious faith and practice in public (Graham, 2013).

### **3. The perfect storm**

We find ourselves confronted by new waves of religious faith that in their novel and unexpected qualities pose considerable new challenges for the way we think, speak and act in relation to religion. We are confronted with 'a perfect storm' of conflicting and contradictory currents, which the recent Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life summarised in this way:

- Increase of those identifying as having 'No Religion'
- Decline in Christian belief and affiliation
- Increasing diversity amongst those who do claim a religious faith (Woolf Institute, 2015, p. 7)



And yet, it is clear that against many expectations, religion has not vanished from Western culture. If anything, it exercises a greater fascination than ever before. For most of the second half of the C20th, the gradual marginalization of religious belief and institutions and the privatization of religious belief and practice formed the mainstay of social scientific thinking about religion. But alongside these

secularising trends, and where I think our C21st situation confounds the sociological orthodoxy of the mid- to late C20th, is the unexpected and unprecedented re-emergence of religion onto the global political scene. One of the characteristics of the past thirty years has been the way in which religion has become newly visible and experienced as global phenomenon of considerable political and cultural power - for good and ill.

Even Britain, indeed the whole of Europe, is hugely more culturally and religiously diverse in 2015 than in 1945 or 1965. This is largely due to patterns of migration from former colonies such as the British Commonwealth and Eastern Europe.

Such talk of resurgence must be tempered, however, by unequivocal evidence of drastic decline in the institutional strength of organized Christianity in the West. The most recent statistics on Church of England attendance record for the first time a dip below 1 million weekly attendance. Formal affiliation across the mainstream Christian denominations, however it is measured, continues to fall. And even if organized forms of religion hold sway, they are far more deinstitutionalised and fluid due to social media, globalisation and post-traditional forms of church.

It seems people are troubled and fascinated in equal measure by this new visibility of faith, not least because those who 'speak of God in public' are now in a minority. Society as a whole is nervous about the public engagement of faith groups and whether it is right to (re)incorporate the vocabulary of faith into our common life.

Perhaps the most serious finding of recent research, and one which is quite relevant to our concerns, is the conclusion that religion is viewed increasingly not as something innocuous or marginal, but, as Linda Woodhead has put it, 'a toxic brand'<sup>4</sup> (Woodhead, 2014).

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/11/03/religion-beyond-belief\\_n\\_6094442.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/11/03/religion-beyond-belief_n_6094442.html)



We see that most clearly, of course, in the persistence of those voices who continue to argue that religion has no place in the modern world. In 2008-2009, a federation of secularists and atheists sponsored a red London bus emblazoned with the slogan, ‘There’s probably no god. Now get on and enjoy your life.’ The death of God is the beginning of human freedom. Religion is inherently irrational, infantile and abusive. Such campaigners object to any religiously-motivated intervention in public life, such as policies around same-sex marriage, assisted dying, faith schools, and so on. But those espousing an explicitly atheistic opposition to religion are only the tip of the iceberg of those who might say they have ‘No Religion’ but continue to be interested in religious issues. You may have noted for yourselves how people are more likely to describe themselves as ‘Spiritual but not Religious’ (SBNR). This is particularly marked across different generations, and reflected in the statistics on the religious outlooks and affiliations of young people in particular (ComRes, 2013; Pew, 2013).

Similarly, the rise of movements such as the Sunday Assembly,<sup>5</sup> which describes itself as a ‘godless congregation’, suggests that people are not antipathetic to being part of communities that celebrate wonder, compassion and love and which seek to explore life’s

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.sundayassembly.com/>

deepest questions and values – it’s just that they don’t find organized religion is the best way of doing that. In an era of declining affiliation to formal, creedal religious institutions, and yet signs of enduring interest in matters of personal faith and spirituality, the supernatural, the popularity of ‘mindfulness’ and various kinds of spiritual practice, popular culture – what Em McAvan calls ‘the postmodern sacred’ (McAvan, 2012) - has become one of the most vibrant exemplars of the re-enchantment of the world.



The rise of militant Islamism, the growth of non-affiliated spiritualities and so-called ‘godless congregations’, together with the marked discomfort towards expressions of religion in public all reveal significant aspects of the shifting and convoluted fault-lines between religion and secularism. We find ourselves in a complex and radically polarized world – as the philosopher Terry Eagleton has put it: ‘No sooner had a thoroughly atheistic culture arrived on the scene ... than the deity himself was suddenly back on the agenda with a vengeance. ... *The world is ... divided between those who believe too much and those who believe too little.*’ (Eagleton, 2014, pp. 197, my emphasis)

So we are not talking about a reversal or denial of the secular, but of a far more complex task of living within this novel co-existence of the sacred and the secular. And so far, I’ve been arguing that, as evidenced in the continuing interest in spirituality and the sacred, people have not lost faith in experiences that offer them a sense of wonder; which enable them to be caught up in a vision larger than themselves; that offers them some kind of

personal and moral compass. And yet our culture is sceptical about the shortcomings of organized religion. What kind of ‘post-secular’ (Graham, 2013) apologetics will be fit for purpose?



#### **4. Learning to ‘Speak Christian’<sup>6</sup> in a world troubled by religion**

I’ve been arguing that our contemporary dispensation cannot be conceived merely as the return of Christendom or the simple ‘re-enchantment’ of modernity. How do we deal with the new manifestations of religious conviction and the strange ‘after-life’ of the sacred in our public life?

The theologian Graham Tomlin has described people’s cultural attitudes towards religious faith as follows:

‘Not hostile to or uninformed about Christianity, often interested in spiritual questions and prepare to face the difficult issues of mortality and meaning. And yet the Church is the last place they would look for answers.’ (Tomlin 2008, 4)

Whilst the church struggles to make space in our culture today to be heard, this calls for a creative and proactive engagement with our culture. It requires us to acknowledge the

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<sup>6</sup> Borg, 2011

reasons why people find religion alien and ‘toxic’ and to engage seriously with that. Out of that awareness that nothing can be taken for granted, that the world at large no longer feels at ease with religion and cannot understand when the churches ‘speak Christian’, then we need to search for the points of engagement and dialogue, or ‘rapprochement’ all the more diligently. How is this to be done? What would it mean to engage with culture, to undertake – or reclaim – the practice of apologetics?

## **5. History of Apologetics**

Traditionally, Christians have been charged with the task of defending and commending their faith to a wide variety of sceptics and enquirers. Apologetics is the term that refers to a type of Christian discourse that endeavours to offer a defence of the grounds of faith to a range of interlocutors. It has been described as ‘the attempt to defend a particular belief or system of beliefs against objections’ (Beilby 2011, p. 11).

In his *History of Apologetics*, Avery Dulles identifies three strands of Christian apologetics: ‘*Religious apologists*’ who traditionally would engage with adherents of other religious or philosophical systems and debate the intellectual coherence of the Gospel. ‘*Internal apologists*’ were more concerned to address doctrinal error or heresy within the Christian community itself; and a third group, which Dulles terms ‘*Political apologists*’ advanced defences of Christianity to the powers-that-be, often in the face of state persecution (Dulles, 1971, p. xx).

The exhortation of the first letter of Peter (3:15) offers a study of how Christians in the early centuries negotiated their relationships with the outside world, especially in the face of scepticism from neighbours and hostility or worse from Imperial State power. The main warrant of the Church's credibility (and that of the Gospel) is the proclamation in deed and word of Christ crucified.

'Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened. But in your hearts, set apart 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 behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.' (1 Peter 3.13-17).

This is a text forged out of the collective experience of those who perceive themselves as suffering for their faith, which by all accounts was not uncommon amongst first and second century Christian communities. Commentators are unsure as to whether this was chiefly at the hands of the State or simply everyday hostility from those around them.

But such a social and political climate called for a particular kind of resilience, which the writer argues rests in the example and inspiration of Christ himself. The community is advised to see no contradiction between whatever difficulties they experience in the present and the reward or vindication that is to come, since this mirrors the logic of

Christ's suffering and death and the promise of his resurrection. This is the 'hope' that sustains them in their privation.

The crisis or hardship afflicting the community in the present is contrasted with the promise of redemption in the future; but in the interim, Christians are called to demonstrate lives of discipline and obedience, marked by outward signs of holiness, in which deeds and words are indivisible.

So we can note the significance for this writer of Christian character itself as constituting its own apologetics. By living distinctive and exemplary lives, refusing either to cave in to persecution or assimilate to ungodly values, Christians are identifying with Christ's redemptive suffering and pledging their hope in the ultimate victory of the Cross. And if to be a 'Christian' is considered a crime, then it is one that a Christian should uphold with pride – which might be seen as another small subversion of Imperial authority, since in a normal trial one pleads innocent to any charges; yet here, the church is instructed to confess freely to their faith in the name of Christ who also underwent trial and punishment. The praxis and witness of a community prepared to model its corporate life on the suffering of Jesus constitutes its own best apologetic.

'But in your hearts, set apart 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.' 1 Peter 3:15, NIV.

Elsewhere in the New Testament, we have some other notable examples.

Beginning with the day of Pentecost (Acts 2) the disciples communicated the Good news through the medium of the cultural and philosophical world-views of their audiences. Acts of the Apostles records how on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2.14–36), Peter’s address to the crowd was couched in a way that placed Jesus as Messiah, prophet of Israel and fulfilment of the Hebrew Scriptures.

The apostle Paul’s journey to Thessalonica (Acts 17.1–9) included a visit to a synagogue, where he presented Jesus as the fulfilment of the Jewish Scriptures and prophets, which appeared sufficient to generate a hostile reaction from his audience.



In the story of Paul’s appearance in Athens (Acts 17.16–33), the effectiveness of those preaching the Gospel rested on the adoption of the cultures and philosophical assumptions of their listeners. When preaching at the Areopagus, Paul focuses less on the Hebrew scriptures and chooses instead to engage with the pagan philosophy of the crowd. He preaches the Gospel as the fulfilment of ancient, hitherto hidden, divine wisdom. When on trial in Caesarea (Acts 24.1–8), Paul has to defend himself against the orator Tertullus, he does so by appealing to the Jewish Laws and the Propheets. He is then transferred to

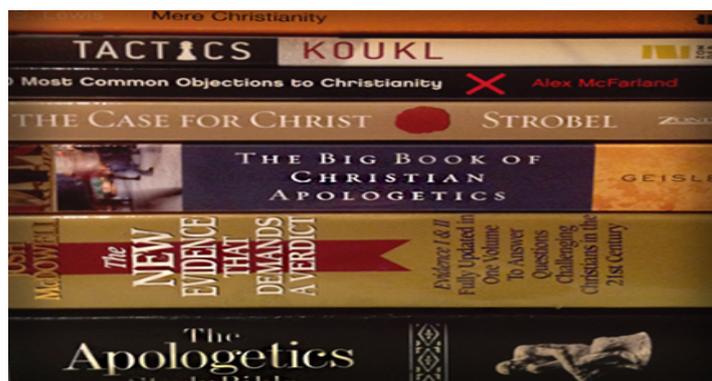
Jerusalem (25: 1-12) where he avails himself of his rights as a Roman citizen to be heard by Caesar's court. These principles establish important precedents: of beginning from the world-view of one's dialogue partner, with an ability to be almost 'bilingual' in terms of speaking about the Gospel but in terms accessible and comprehensible to one's audience.

The need to adopt the thought-forms of one's interlocutors, what we might term the 'dialogical' or 'bilingual' nature of apologetics, is also primary amongst the apologists of 2<sup>nd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> century. As Christianity itself expanded, so it encountered different alternative cultures; and it continued to attract attention, not all of it benign, from the Imperial authorities. So we see a continuity of the threads identified by Avery Dulles, of religious, internal and political, or public apologists: addressing Jews, pagans, sceptics and Emperors.

Apologetics has always responded to the challenges of its intellectual, religious or political context. Some of the principal works of medieval apologetics, notably the *Summa contra Gentiles* of St. Thomas Aquinas, were influenced by the emergence of Islam and the resurgence of Arabic philosophy. After the Protestant Reformation, much of Catholic apologetics was directed against Protestant claims, and vice versa. From the early modern period, as scientific enquiry came to rival religious dogma, an emphasis on natural law and the use of reason became more prominent. In the modern period, the influence of John Calvin and Karl Barth began to eclipse the practice of apologetics, since it was held that the non-believer cannot be expected to turn to faith on the basis of reason alone, since human sin makes it impossible for us to arrive at intellectual acceptance without the intervention of the Holy Spirit.

## 6. Modern Apologetics

In contemporary theology apologetics has perhaps somewhat fallen from favour, and has tended to become the exclusive province of a mainly North American Protestant Evangelical theologians, referring to rational propositional argument that is intended to lead to conversion. Whilst the Biblical and Classical paradigms seemed to involve a kind of performative witness in which the exemplary lifestyle represented the primary focus of an apologetic, and where the apologist sought to find shared terms of reference from which to conduct their argument, the focus within C20th and C21st apologetics has tended to be on forms of propositional belief which correspond with Christian doctrine. As James Beilby, a leading exponent explains, 'In some cases, apologetics appropriately and naturally leads to an offer for a person to commit her life to Christ' (Beilby, 1983, p. 23), granting a person 'the intellectual permission to believe' (Craig, 2010, p. 19), as preparation for what John Stackhouse calls 'crossing the line' (Stackhouse 2002, 78).



'Issues such as the epistemological authority of Scripture, the intellectual coherence of theism or miracles, the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus ... take center stage in modern discussions of Christian faith.' (Penner, 2013, p. 33)

Historically, however, much of this flies in the face of the predominant trajectory of Christian apologetics which saw dialogue with surrounding culture as a necessary engagement and not simply capitulation to secular understanding. Whereas early Christian apologetics saw theology not as primarily evidential or positivist but as something that informed a way of life and articulated a whole way of being, these modern apologists have adopted what Myron Penner calls ‘a kind of *apologetic positivism* ... according to which Christian beliefs must be demonstrably rational to be accepted.’ (2013, p. 44)

Behind such a model of apologetics is a particular view of salvation as being called out of a hostile and degenerate world. This spills over into a language, conscious or unconscious, of adversarial combat. So for example, in the face of prevailing cultural challenges, Christians will need ‘upgraded apologetic weaponry’ (Milbank, 2011: xiii); Tacelli and Kreeft talk about ‘the battle of arguments’ (2003: 10, 139); and William Lane Craig predicts, ‘we’ve got to train our kids for war’ (2008: 20). No wonder John Stackhouse decries this in terms of ‘apologetics as martial arts’ (Stackhouse 2002, ix).

However, as John Stackhouse goes on to argue,

‘Christianity ... is much more than a set of propositions to which one might or might not grant intellectual assent. It is, at its heart, a path of life, a following of Jesus Christ as disciples and as members of the worldwide Church. If apologetics consists entirely of

words and truths, therefore, it will literally fail to communicate Christianity, but instead, literally distort it by shrinking it to what words and truths can portray.’ (Stackhouse 2002, 131)

And actually, some recent research suggests that forms of proselytising apologetics are actually not very effective. This is contained in a report, *Talking Jesus*, commissioned by Com Res and the Evangelical Alliance (2015). Of a sample of over 2500 non-Christians who had been recipients of such conversations with Christian friends, relatives or colleagues, 16% said they felt sadness at not sharing that person’s religious convictions and 19% said they wanted to know more. But 59% said they did not want to know more about Jesus; 49% were not open to a further encounter; and 42% were glad they did not share that person’s faith. The report concludes that most people become Christians through family life and long-term friendships, and that witnessing to faith may be better undertaken through shared activities rather than personal evangelism of this kind.



This is not to say that defending and commending the faith should not be carried out as an essential part of Christian witness. However, Christians today need an entirely different paradigm for their apologetics. As I have been spelling out so far today, our contemporary

age seems to carry particular challenges, in which religion is both a clear and present reality in the world and yet proves troublesome and alien to many people.

In his book *Unapologetic* (2012), Francis Spufford offers an extended model of what a contemporary apologetics might look like. Its title reflects Spufford's rejection of the predominant paradigm of propositional proofs, in favour of a deeply personal narrative of what it feels like to inhabit a faith in a culture where that is deeply suspect. His core question is simple: What does it feel like to feel yourself forgiven?

You'd be hard-pressed to find a typical conversion story here. This is more about a day to day struggle with the improbabilities of belief in the existence of God, and yet alongside that a determination to live *as-if*: God did exist, forgiveness were a reality, and the world could be mended. He concedes that to a world convinced by scientific argument and hard evidence, it is hard to be convinced by any other way of knowing, any other kind of criteria for what is 'true'. But for him, faith is not about empirical knowledge but about the reality of lived experience, and how that looks and feels from the inside.

For Spufford, faith is about a struggle to live truthfully and authentically rather than possessing definitive truths and absolute certainties. Apologetics is not so much a matter of rational argument, so much as being able to explain and witness to the wider canvass of an entire lifestyle and to narrate and make transparent and accessible an entire world-view. As John Stackhouse puts it, 'The fundamental problem of religious allegiance ... is not about what we think, but what or whom we love' (Stackhouse 2002, 113). Apologetics

has never been a discipline of 'proof' in this propositional way, but more an art of persuasion and testimony, of bearing witness where one's own personal integrity is the greatest warrant.

## **7. 'Ambassadors for Christ'**

Such an apologetics of presence and praxis is, for Christians, rooted in their response to the initiative of God through Jesus Christ. In their lives, Christians are witnesses to God's actions to reconcile creation back to Godself, in Jesus. You'll note, then, that there is a connection here between apologetics and mission – but not simply in terms of personal conversion but in the actions that link the work and witness of ordinary Christians with the mission and work of God. I would therefore argue that apologetics is best understood as the testimony – in word and deed – to the presence of God in the world, addressed to the world.

The twentieth century rediscovery of the conception of mission as the *missio Dei* is crucial here. This has asserted, in the words of the missiologist David Bosch, that 'mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God' (Bosch, 2011, p. 400). *Missio Dei* articulates the missionary character of God and God's activity in the world, for the good of the world, as distinct from the activity of the church (Bosch, 2011, p. 401). Bosch acknowledges that this concept can be problematic. It may be vulnerable to equating human social development with the incoming Kingdom of God and has been used to imply that there is no need for the church to engage in mission, that 'God articulates himself'. However, despite this ambiguity Bosch argues that *missio Dei* provides an important reminder that mission is fundamentally God's initiative (Bosch, 2011, p. 402) and that it is

a function of God's reconciliatory acts within the whole of creation, the whole inhabited earth, and so goes beyond the boundaries of the Church.

This understanding enables us to have a more integrated, if dialectical understanding, of the relationship between Gospel and culture, or church and world. Mission is not about simply inviting people to join an elect, or to see the church as the 'ark' which rescues people from the iniquities of sin. Instead, it encourages us to see God as always ahead of, and beyond us, as something that would never simply be enclosed within one creed, one institution. Whilst we can learn from the wisdom of the past, it is only in the present moment that we can identify God's mission – but this means we are not trying to persuade the world to go back to some imagined golden age of Christendom, but rather to see how God's presence is re-enchanting things as they are now. Christians are God's witnesses, advocates, ambassadors, apologists in that secular reality.

And of course, in some respect this is a triple response. It comprises, firstly, an act of discernment and theological reflection, in terms of trying to attend to what God is doing in the world, and where. It stresses God's prior initiative and action in effecting the work of reconciliation and redemption, and practical discernment of those signs as a kind of 'double listening' to tradition and context. This is the prelude to the second stage, which is the task of participation in that mission: a vocation of discipleship and activism. Thirdly, then comes the explicitly apologetic task, I would



say, in terms of bearing witness to that apprehension of God at work in the world, but often in ways both prior to and beyond the conventionally ecclesial or religious. So this three-fold work of discernment – of the signs of the times, of our calling to respond, and to announce and commend the work of God, is always a form of *public theology*. The task of bearing witness to God in the world, to the world needs to be accessible and comprehensible not just to some specialist minority or exclusive remnant, but to the whole of creation.

This three-fold process of experiencing the presence of God, helping to bring the mission Dei to fruition and then bearing witness, is helpfully articulated in the second letter to the Corinthians, which combines an extended reflection on God's actions in the world, through Jesus, to redeem creation, with an illuminating metaphor for Christian discipleship as that very response to the grace of God. It offers us the metaphor of apologetics as effectively about being an 'ambassador' for Christ.

'So all of us believers are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We are petitioning the world on Christ's behalf: 'know you have been reconciled to God'. (2 Cor 5:20)

This metaphor appears in the wider context of a discussion of reconciliation (v17). A new creation has come about as the result of a gift from God (in the person of Jesus) who reconciles humanity back to Godself (vv 18-19). Paul identifies himself, in turn, as Christ's ambassador or representative, summoning people to participate in that work of divine reconciliation.

The terminology of ambassador, rather than an alternative such as messenger, is significant. The Greek term, πρεσβευτής refers to an envoy, or legate of the Emperor – an interesting resonance with my earlier discussion of the necessarily public of Christian speech and presence. But an ambassador is not acting on his or her own behalf, of course, but stands in for, or represents, the one who sent them, the one on whose authority they serve. Ambassadors are public representatives of a government or cause: when a citizen of one country meets an ambassador, they encounter not just an individual but the nation or organization in whose name they have been sent.

This is more than a person-to-person ministry, too: it is about being the accredited witness to the reconciliation of regimes and powers – almost like the bearer of a peace treaty between different nations or governments. As ambassadors, Christians have the responsibility not just to operate as individual believers but as public representatives. When a citizen of one country meets an ambassador, they encounter not just a private person but the nation or organization in whose name they have been sent. An ambassador is generally sent to a foreign country, required to operate on unfamiliar territory, in a second language perhaps; and although they may be welcomed as a guest, they must show due respect for the culture in which they find themselves. Ambassadors and other diplomatic envoys may be required to petition for certain privileges: perhaps in trade or political agreements; but in other respects, it's not just about self-interest, but about building bridges, establishing mutual benefit, and facilitating cultural exchange. There are no grounds to assume a position of victimhood, or antagonism, therefore, but only to receive the respect and hospitality due to an honoured representative, and to reciprocate.

The church in Corinth is being advised on how to live in a pluralistic world – more perhaps like our post-secular times, with many faiths. To become ‘ambassadors for Christ’ is not in order to shout down their opponents in debate but to be faithful and plausible representatives of the Gospel. It suggests that these Christians were being reminded that their faith entailed more than a private or domestic spirituality – all baptised Christians have to be able to practise a ‘public theology’ that demonstrates in word and deed what Christianity is all about.

However, I end with a challenge, which in a sense takes us full circle to the topic of my lecture last year, on the Laity. It seems to me that the church has often failed to equip its ordinary members with the confidence to bear witness to their faith, and to connect their theology with a commitment to service to others. The writer of the first letter of Peter may advise Christians to ‘give an answer to the hope that is within us’; but what if we discover that we cannot find the words to articulate it? It may not only be in society at large, but crucially, within the churches that we find a deficit of religious and theological literacy. How much confidence, how much training, is the ordinary (lay) Christian given to prepare them for that ambassadorial task? Christians owe it to themselves as much as others to foster a greater skilfulness and articulacy in public life: to earn the right to be taken seriously, and to be willing and able to justify their moral, social and political convictions in terms which speak intelligibly into the public square. In other words, before we can ‘speak Christian’ to a world troubled by religion, we have to learn to speak Christian for ourselves, and maybe to find new ways of rendering the language of faith for new generations and contexts.

But why do we need to learn to 'speak Christian' at all? Is it reasonable to expect that the sources and resources of Scripture and Tradition be made to speak more convincingly to today's culture? Or, if the language of faith is so off-putting, are we better off translating everything into a general language? The answer is, I think, that we do still need the nurture and foundations in the language, traditions and practices of faith. Besides, to abandon the language of faith just because it feels anachronistic is to leave it to those who misappropriate it and render it so one-dimensional.

So 'speaking Christian' into the public square may require some mediation or translation between the historical tradition and contemporary culture – but of course, that's what Christian apologists have been doing since the apostle Paul onwards! Yet even so, that kind of translation or bilingualism – of bridging one culture to another – is not the same as Esperanto, of an invented common language. In Christian terms, Jesus is still the source of our 'language' about what is good, true and meaningful (Borg 2011, 238) – but the task of apologetics is to find the common ground where true conversations can take place. And I've been suggesting that the convergent language of the common good, of a shared concern for the repair of the world (in the name of the *missio Dei*) represents the territory in which the best apologetics of presence can be practised.

Christians are charged, therefore, with brushing up on their own theological literacy as part of the ministry of the church in the world, especially as it faces the challenge of justifying and defending the very relevance of the Christian faith in a culture that no

longer grants automatic access or credence. I've been arguing today that this has been one of the tasks with which the church has been charged since its earliest beginnings. However, it means, I think, that there is a corresponding onus on Church leaders to put renewed energy into basic Christian education and adult formation so that ordinary Christians are better equipped to exercise that task of 'speaking Christian' with confidence. The education of the laity, and their 'theological literacy', becomes a pressing priority for the credibility and effectiveness of Christian apologetics.

## 8. Conclusion

However fractured and fragmented the public domain may be, the re-emergence of religion as a force in public life requires the voices of faith to consider how best to communicate the basis for their convictions.



In asking what kind of engagement is best fit for purpose, I've been arguing for a 'new apologetics' – which in many respects is very old – and which involves a three-fold process of:

- i) discerning the actions of God in the world
- ii) participating in the praxis of God's mission and
- iii) explaining and articulating to others the theological values by which such praxis is sustained.

It is a matter of being prepared to speak of God *in* the world, *to* the world. It is a question of Christians being 'ambassadors for Christ' (2 Corinthians 5:20) on behalf of this news of reconciliation. Certainly, it recognises that persons of belief must be called to account for their faith and be prepared to justify themselves; but primarily, seeks to pursue a public vocation that is more interested in the well-being of the human family than winning an argument. It respects our common places of pluralism and encounter. It is an attempt to find common cause in practices of accountability that don't seek to privilege or defend Christian supremacy, but are a means of participating in God's mission in deed and word. This is apologetics not as a weapon of conversion, but a gesture of solidarity and reconciliation.

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