

Challenges and possibilities of inter-religious and cross-cultural apologetic persuasion

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In 1997, I left for the Central African Republic in order to teach theology at the Bangui Evangelical School of Theology. I had looked forward to the fact that apologetics would be among the courses assigned to me. Apologetics had always been an interest to me, both because of a personal need to be able to give an account of the hope we have in Christ and because of my work in the Christian student movement in the Netherlands. As I somehow expected, I discovered that most of the western apologetic literature was of little value for most of my African students. They asked questions that were never addressed in western apologetic literature, such as: 'How come God can take so long to answer our prayers for healing, while traditional healers seems to be so much more effective?' My African students had also different criteria to distinguish truth and error. While western apologetics books would be interested in how the Christian faith could be accounted for in the face of modern science, many of my new students were more concerned how the Christian faith related to the traditions of their ancestors.

I was somewhat prepared for this discovery, for I had already studied postmodernism. One of the main theses of postmodernism is, after all, that modern western thought is not neutral or universal. It is as much a culturally and historically determined expression of human thought as any other thought-system. Cultural relativism had stated that Western thought was as relative as any other culturally formed system.

Furthermore, a critical study of modern and postmodern western thought had shown me that they were based on radically different basic principles than the Christian worldview. Though modern western thought in its origin had Christian roots, the form it had taken later was far removed from those roots. There is no reason to give modern thinking and modern rationality a privileged place as the main interlocutor for Christian apologetic dialogue. Apologetic witness to modern western thought is equally cross-cultural, just like apologetic witness

1 An earlier version of this article was presented as an open lecture at the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, 29 May 2007.

to any other non-Christian culture. Apologetic dialogue with modernism and postmodernism is equally inter-religious dialogue, because these systems function like pseudo-religions.

These discoveries have major implications for the nature of apologetic dialogue. World-wide Christianity has many different dialogue partners and much of the more widely available apologetic literature is simply not up to the task. We need not only apologetic witness to the Oxford intellectual; we also need apologetic witness to adherents of African traditional religions, to different types of Muslims, to Buddhists, Hindus and Sikhs. Furthermore, we need apologetic witness that addresses those people in the cultural contexts in which they live. We need cross-cultural apologetic dialogue that builds bridges between the Christian faith and worldview in its different cultural expressions on the one hand and radically different worldviews with a variety of corresponding cultural expressions on the other.

The need for a serious reflection on the possibility of cross-cultural apologetic dialogue presents itself particularly in the light of new anthropological research. In the second half of the twentieth century, cultural anthropologists – and philosophers in their wake – have become increasingly aware of the cultural embeddedness of all human thinking. There is no overarching human rationality with regard to which all culturally embedded conceptual frameworks can be evaluated, for all human thinking is located in a particular cultural context. Apologetics is therefore not about justifying the Christian faith in terms of a supposedly universally shared rationality. It is rather about how a meaningful dialogue about truth is possible among different culturally embedded conceptual systems. The urgent question becomes how, if at all, apologetic dialogue across cultural barriers is possible. In the first major section, I will explore some of the reasons why cross-cultural persuasion is so difficult. In the remainder of the article, I will explore three ways in which cross-cultural apologetic bridges can be built.

I am not simply concerned with cross-cultural communication. Those questions have also been addressed elsewhere.² I am concerned with the following step: if people with another cultural frame of reference do understand what faith in Christ is about, are their valid ways of reasoning that may help persuading them of the truth and goodness of this faith?

I prefer to speak of persuasion rather than of argument, when talking about cross-cultural apologetics. This term not only shows that forms of argumentation can be varied and complex. It also respects the fact that it has an emotional and moral component. A rational evaluation of different worldviews is not possible when one's primary interest is to defend one's proper beliefs and interests. It is only possible when one has the appropriate openness to seriously consider alternatives on the basis of their inherent truthfulness and goodness. As Polanyi

2 E.g. in Harold Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith and Mission* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2001) 285-289.

says: 'Demonstration must be supplemented, therefore, by forms of persuasion which can induce a conversion.'³

The challenge of cross-cultural apologetic witness leads us into a wide field of related questions that need serious reconsideration. Let me just mention three convictions that form the backdrop of this article, but which cannot be treated in detail here.

The idea of cross-cultural apologetics presupposes in the first place a certain understanding of culture and the cultural embeddedness of human existence. In this respect, I work with the following model: a culture ordinarily reflects a certain religion or pseudo-religious worldview. In certain cases, however, a culture is the result of different worldview influences, such as current African Christian culture or current secularized Christian culture in Europe. A worldview can express itself in different cultural forms, so that we can have legitimate differently inculturated forms of the Christian faith. Yet, *insofar as* the Christian worldview demands a cultural expression which reflects specifically Christian convictions, conversion to Christianity is a conversion from one culture with its central worldview to another. At the basis of a worldview one can find a fundamental allegiance, for example to the clan, to the autonomy of the individual or to Christ. Cross-cultural apologetic persuasion seeks to make possible a change of allegiance to Christ, but this implies a change of worldview and of culture.

In the second place, we should always be conscious that apologetic dialogue by itself remains largely unconvincing, unless it is embedded in the life of a Christian community in which the Spirit is at work in reforming a people into the image of Christ. The life of the church empowered by the Spirit forms in some sorts the 'plausibility structure' without which our apologetic dialogue remains a vacuous intellectual exercise without grounding in real life.⁴

The third basic conviction concerns the need to emphasize that the way we approach cross-cultural apologetic dialogue is influenced by fundamental epis-

3 Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Postcritical Philosophy*, Corrected edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 151. The apologetic use of the concept is prominent in I. O. Guinness, *Towards a Reappraisal of Christian Apologetics: Peter. L. Berger's Sociology of Knowledge as the Sociological Phenomenon to Christian Apologetics* (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Oxford, 1981), 327-372; T. F. Torrance, on 'Theological Persuasion', in: Thomas F. Torrance, *God and Rationality* (London e.a.: Oxford University Press, 1971), 195ff.; cf. Thomas F. Torrance, *Theological Science* (London, e.a.: Oxford University Press, 1969), vii. Nancey Murphy defends, with reference to Ronald Thiemann and Willard V. O. Quine & J. S. Ullian, that 'Holism understands justification as a process of rational persuasion' (Nancey Murphy, 'Postmodern Apologetics: Or Why Theologians must Pay Attention to Science', in: W. Mark Richardson & Wesley J. Wildman (eds.), *Religion and Science: History, Method, Dialogue* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 108; cf. Ronald F. Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985) 75f; Willard V. O. Quine, & J. S. Ullian, *The Web of Belief*, Second edition (New York: Random House, 1978) 125ff).

4 Cf. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK, 1989) 223, 228.

temological convictions. It is my contention that many of the difficulties in the reflection about the possibility and character of cross-cultural apologetic witness come from the influence of modernist foundationalist epistemologies. Modernist foundationalist epistemologies are characterized by the search for universally accessible or accessible foundations for a shared argument. Such an argument is of course difficult across cultural and religious barriers, and that is why apologists often look for universally recognised rational principles that could guide cross-cultural apologetic dialogue. I believe that such principles cannot be found, but that this does not necessarily lead to cultural relativism. The approach to cross-cultural apologetic dialogue proposed here presupposes a post-foundationalist epistemology that holds on to a critical realist understanding of knowledge, yet believes that this knowledge is acquired in the context of forms of reasoning embedded in specific cultural and religious traditions. Thinkers from different backgrounds such as Michael Polanyi and Alasdair MacIntyre have shown that the cultural embeddedness of all human thinking does not necessarily imply cultural relativism.⁵ The validity of this thesis is presupposed here; nonetheless, the question remains how meaningful apologetic dialogue across religious and cultural barriers is possible. That question will be addressed in this article.

Barriers

Before we can explore the more positive aspects of cross-cultural persuasion, it is good to have a clearer picture of the different barriers that need to be overcome in the process. Although all these barriers interconnect, it is helpful to distinguish three types of barriers. Some barriers are related to the nature of the human being itself, others are related to the nature of the impact of a worldview on our lives, and still others are related to the way possible anomalies or criticisms are addressed.

Barriers related to the nature of the human being

There are first of all barriers related to the nature of the human being. All human beings are profoundly bound up with their culture and receive their basic outlook on reality from the community in which they are socialised and from which we receive our identity. Even the consideration that this image we have might

5 See e.g. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*; Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988); cf. Torrance, *Theological Science*; Thomas F. Torrance, 'The Framework of Belief', in: Thomas F. Torrance (ed.), *Belief in Science and Christian Life: The Relevance of Michael Polanyi's Thought for Christian Faith and Life* (Edinburgh: The Handsel Press, 1980), 1-48; Thomas F. Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology: The Realism of Christian Theology*, With a new foreword by Kurt Anders Richardson (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999); P. Mark Achtemeier, 'The Truth of a Tradition. Critical Realism in the Thought of Alasdair MacIntyre and T. F. Torrance', *SJT* 47 (1994), 355-374; Benno van den Toren, 'A New Direction in Christian Apologetics: An Exploration with Reference to Postmodernism', *EJT* 2 (1993), pp. 49-64.

not be in accordance with reality in itself is profoundly unsettling. As Kraft notes: "Tradition is a powerful deterrent to change. It seems easier to continue with a tradition, even if it is widely acknowledged to be deficient, than to go to the effort of changing it."⁶ Our community gives us a sense of security and the idea that I may need to disengage myself from this community is unsettling, even if I knew that there is a new supportive community welcoming me. Christians from the individualistic western world often do not realise how little supportive their community generally is in comparison with some of the communities to which their dialogue partner belongs. A Muslim in the West considering conversion is not only considering a new religious allegiance and a new outlook of the world. She is also considering converting to the community of the church, which often seems rather shallow, compared to the close-knit Muslim communities in the Diaspora on which she depends.

A second aspect of human nature that forms a barrier to be overcome is the twisting of our openness to God, which in the fallen human being manifests itself as a sinful allegiance and enslavement to what is not God.⁷

Barriers related to the nature of worldviews

Secondly, there are barriers related to the nature of worldviews and the impact they have on our lives. Worldviews do not represent a loose collection of ideas that can be exchanged for others in a piecemeal manner. The different basic elements of a worldview do reinforce each other, such as for example the concept of *nirvana*, of *karma* and of reincarnation in Buddhism. A worldview also coheres with an *ethos* – a way of life. The following relationship that Geertz sees in religious communities also holds for non-religious ones:

In a religious belief and practice a group's ethos is rendered intellectually reasonable by being shown to represent a way of life ideally adapted to the actual state of affairs the world view describes, while the worldview is rendered emotionally convincing by being presented as an image of an actual state of affairs particularly well-arranged to accommodate such a way of life.⁸

In the same way a worldview also coheres with a certain allegiance to what we consider most worthwhile to pursue,⁹ be it individual happiness, the continuation and flourishing of our clan, entry in the Koranic Paradise, absorption in the *Nirvana*, loving communion with God, or whatever. Again, the worldview provides this basic allegiance its most profound rationale and the fundamental allegiance provides the worldview with a strong attraction, for it renders it possible to pursue what we consider most worthy.

6 Charles H. Kraft, *Anthropology for Christian Witness* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 380; cf. Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 197.

7 Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 205.

8 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (London: Fontana Press, 1993), 89f.

9 Kraft, *Anthropology*, 452f; David K. Naugle, *Worldview: The History of a Concept* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 267ff.

So far, most social scientists will be able to agree with this analysis. As Christians we should go one step further in our analysis and see alternative worldviews also as either vehicles of spiritual oppression or of spiritual freedom. Worldviews represent spiritual forces and a change of worldview, particularly from an oppressive worldview to the liberating Christian faith, therefore also implies liberation from spiritual bondage in the context of a power encounter.¹⁰

These threads of allegiance, worldview, ethos, and spiritual power weave together to an almost unbreakable bond(age) in which our mind, will and emotions are all pulled in one direction. If it were not for the many inner tensions between our basic allegiance, what we sometimes discover to be true, and our emotional and other needs, this fourfold cord could indeed never be broken. We can only take courage and engage in apologetic dialogue because we can rely on the Holy Spirit, who sets people free from bondage and opens blinded eyes and because the phantom-worlds that people create themselves are inherently unstable.

Barriers related to the way in which individuals and communities can deal with objections

Thirdly, we have to consider barriers related to the way in which individuals and communities can deal with objections and experiences that do not fit their basic outlook. The way worldviews function makes them relatively immune from criticism. Polanyi has drawn attention to these barriers with the help of the example of the way in which the Azande deal with challenges to their understanding of magic. The Azande are an African tribe living in the area where Sudan, the Central African Republic and the Congo meet. The use of magic by the Azande has often been used as a paradigmatic example in discussing the inner coherence and stability of non-western outlooks on life, though most of those contributing to this discussion probably never met any Azande.¹¹

Polanyi shows that the stability of Azande beliefs in the face of possible invalidation is first of all guarded by dealing with counter-experiences and objections one by one. When they were confronted with a poison oracle that did not give the expected result, they would handle such a single objection against a vast background of uncontested beliefs, with respect to which one objection does not put much weight in the balance. When a second objection to their belief-system as a whole would be considered, the working of the poison-oracle would be moved back to this stable background of uncontested beliefs.¹² Defenders of a worldview or scientific theory can also set aside unexpected data as 'anomalies',

10 Newbigin, *Gospel*, 204-208; Naugle, *Worldview*, 274ff; Kraft, *Anthropology*, 453.

11 In the discussion people take recourse to the work of the anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950). See for the discussion among others: Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 288-294; William C. Placher, *Unapologetic Theology: A Christian Voice in a Pluralist Conversation* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989) 55-73.

12 Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 289ff.

which will be explained later. This often proves to be a fruitful procedure, for otherwise scientific progress would be greatly hindered,¹³ yet it can contribute to the virtual immunity of a theory.

A second factor contributing to the stability of beliefs is the fact that the interpretative system can expand with new explanations that deal with possible objections.¹⁴ There are a number of explanations available why, at a given instance, a poison-oracle does not work as expected. Maybe the poison was not good¹⁵ or maybe one of those involved in the ritual had consciously or unconsciously transgressed some taboo. In the same way defenders of contested worldviews or scientific theories can add additional theories to explain phenomena that at first sight seem to contradict the main theory.¹⁶

A third factor contributing to the stability of theories and even more to the stability of worldviews is the fact that experiences that could refute the theory are denied any ground on which they can be aligned to gain the strength they need in order to count as instances supporting an alternative view. Polanyi calls this the 'principle of suppressed nucleation'.¹⁷ From the perspective of an adherent of a certain worldview or theory, the provided counter-instances do not seem important enough to give them real attention.¹⁸ This may be directly related to the fact that different worldviews, just like different scientific paradigms, have their own perception of what the real problems are that need our attention.¹⁹

To the factors contributing to the immunity of an outlook to objections and critical instances, we could finally add a number of social pressures within scientific communities, which lead to the isolation of thinkers and researchers working with alternative paradigms. This isolation hinders the development of extensive research on the basis of the alternative paradigm and of an alternative scientific community. The same is true of communities that share a common culture or worldview. They often exclude or isolate individuals that provide an alternative account of reality, thus hindering such an alternative movement from gaining a wider hearing.²⁰

13 Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 293. See for examples Michael Polanyi, *Science, Faith and Society* (London: Oxford University Press, 1946) 15; Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Second edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 81.

14 Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 291.

15 Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 288.

16 Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 291; cf. Kuhn, *Structure*, 78; Peter L. Berger & Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), 122ff, 133; Willard V. O. Quine, 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism', in: Willard V. O. Quine, *From a Logical Point of View: 9 Logical-Philosophical Essays*, Second edition, revised (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), 42f.

17 Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 291.

18 Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 294.

19 Kuhn, *Structure*, 148f.

20 Cf. Berger & Luckmann, *Social Construction*, 103.

After considering these three types of barriers that hinder the change of one worldview and one basic allegiance to another, the prospects for apologetic dialogue seem rather bleak. We need to accept that apologetic argumentation addressed at someone with a different basic outlook on life will never be absolutely conclusive. From her perspective our dialogue partner will give different weight than we do to the arguments we use and the experiences to which we point. Yet, when we change our approach and stop looking for watertight arguments to checkmate our dialogue partners, but rather start looking for persuasive ways to invite them to consider a new perspective on reality, a whole new range of possibilities for apologetic dialogue opens up.

The illuminating power of the whole – and of Jesus

Christ as the clue to an alternative way of life

Because of the inner coherence of the Christian worldview and of alternatives, we will *in the final analysis* only be able to persuade our dialogue partner because of the persuasive power of the person and message of Jesus Christ and the window he opens on our world and condition as a whole. We need to keep both elements in view and in balance: Jesus Christ and the whole of our experience. Jesus Christ is central, because we believe that in him God and the nature and destiny of his creation are revealed. Because the new perspective we gain in Christ illuminates our world and lives and the whole of our experience, we can subsequently present it confidently to those who point to other clues for the understanding of life, such as the mystical enlightenment exemplified by the Buddha, the Koran, modern science, or the tradition of the ancestors. Because the Christian alternative as a whole is able to 'absorb the world'²¹ and give a better reading of all aspects of life as we encounter it, we consider it better than its alternatives.

When we say that this is true 'in the final analysis', we call attention to the fact that in actual apologetic dialogue we will ordinarily not point to the Christian faith as a whole, we will more often concentrate ourselves on particular areas of life and on particular bridges towards the Christian faith. Yet, for two reasons it is important that we draw attention to 'the illuminating power of the whole' from the very beginning.²² We need in the first place keep this in mind to create openness to future dialogue with those who we encounter. They need to understand that our initial explanations of the Gospel can only be considered *initial* introductions into a whole new world, which they will not be able to understand adequately at first glance. They especially have not understood the Christian faith, if they dismiss it from the outset for not making sense *from their own perspective*.

The presentation of Christianity in its entirety as providing an alternative

21 Cf. George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 118.

22 Cf. Lindbeck, *Nature*, 11.

worldview and way of life is also crucial, because people will never seriously reconsider their own outlook and way of life, when they see no alternative. This is also true in major debates in the scientific world: people will not let themselves be swayed by the limitations of their existing paradigm, if they see no valid alternative.²³ This is all the more true when one considers the alternation between worldviews as a whole. We cannot live without such a basic outlook of life that gives our lives meaning, structure, and at least a glimmer of hope. In an important sense our worldview provides us with the world in which we live. Even when we are confronted with serious limitations of this worldview, we will cling all the harder to what we have and defend it more vehemently. If we have no other place to go, we will defend the only place we have, whatever its limitations. Unless we wind up in utter despair, it is only when we consider another way of life and another outlook on the world to be at least initially plausible, that we will have the courage and freedom to leave the place where we stand. Karl Barth identifies a deeper theological side of this general psychological truth when he points to the fact that the natural human being, living without Jesus Christ, simply has no place to go outside his self-made religion, ideology and natural theology.²⁴ If the human beings do not know about grace, they themselves will need to make sense of the world as it is and they will therefore do so in spite of or even because of the lingering despair that underlies all these efforts to make sense of it.

This need of knowing about a plausible alternative to be able to take seriously the limitations of one's present worldview may be one of the reasons why our pounding on non-Christian world-views is often so futile. Take the in-itself valid argument of the self-defeating nature of relativism,²⁵ the argument that relativism should itself be relativised,²⁶ and the argument that few have the courage to live moral relativism to its logical conclusion.²⁷ These arguments – when used as a 'battering ram'²⁸ – will only force people to barricade their door stronger, notwithstanding its cracks and even because of its cracks, as long as they feel that

23 So Kuhn, *Structure*, 77, 145.

24 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Volume II, The Doctrine of God, Part 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 168-170 = *Die kirchliche Dogmatik*, Zweiter Band, Die Lehre von Gott, Erster Halbband (Zollikon/Zürich: Verlag der Evangelischer Buchhandlung, 1940), 188-190.

25 As developed in Alvin Plantinga, 'A Defense of Religious Exclusivism', in: T. D. Senor (ed.), *The Rationality of Belief and the Plurality of Truth* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1995), 191-215.; James W. Sire, 'On Being a Fool for Christ and an Idiot for Nobody: Logocentricity and Modernity', in: Timothy R. Phillips & Dennis L. Okholm (eds.), *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World* (Downer's Grove: IVP, 1995), 114f.

26 Peter L. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (Garden City: Anchor, 1980), 9.

27 Alister E. McGrath, *Bridge-Building: Effective Christian Apologetics* (Leicester: IVP, 1992), 227-229.

28 The image is McGrath's, who, fortunately, in his approach is generally much more sensitive to his audience than this image suggests (McGrath, *Bridge-Building*, 227).

they have no valid escape. That is how you deal with battering rams. Such arguments only have sense when intellectually and in our lives we present plausible alternative places to go. Even so, the door will be opened more easily when the battering stops and the arguments are used in an altogether different tenor.

I often try to show this graphically to my African students by chalking two separate circles on the classroom floor – which is much easier when your floor is made out of concrete instead of carpet. Let us imagine our dialogue-partner standing in a circle which represents her own world. The best way to bring her so far that she leaves this circle is to invite her to explore the Christian way of life in a non-committal way with one foot already within the Christian circle, the Christian world, to see if it is tenable. It is only when she feels that this is a viable option and when she gradually moves her centre of gravity to the Christian circle, that she will feel comfortable leaving her former world behind and putting both her feet in the Christian world. It is of course quite possible that people just simply leap out of their own world in utter despair, but there is no reason to suppose that this is the paradigmatic case of conversion.

When some initial exploration of the Christian faith happens, it is still possible that conversion takes place with no real understanding of the Christian faith, but is done on the basis of a simple trust. This trust can be awakened by the personality of Jesus, as encountered in the Gospel, or by Christians or a Christian community with whom one is acquainted. Yet in those cases the personality of Christ and the life of Christians provide precisely the initial rationale and plausibility one needs to be able to leave one's former worldview and allegiance. Without such an initial plausibility of the Christian faith we need to batter very hard to get someone moving.

The apologetic use of narrative

In order to introduce our dialogue partner into the Christian world a large variety of means of communication and of literary genres can be used. This is not the place to explore all of these means and genres, yet one literary form deserves special attention: the narrative form. The central role of narrative both in Scripture and in human life in general has been stressed by postmodern theologians and needs to be taken seriously by the apologist. Early modern apologetics considered narrative of little apologetic use and majored on inductive and deductive forms of argumentation. The use of narrative in apologetics has, however, some particular strengths. A first strength of narrative is that it appeals to other and more comprehensive sides of our humanity than the classical types of argument – particularly the imagination and the emotions. Secondly, narrative does not lead us step by step into another world, but plunges us right in the middle. The world from the very beginning retains its strangeness in comparison to what the reader or hearer is used to. It becomes bit by bit more familiar but not by accommodating it to the world we know but by expanding our experience of its foreignness. When we plunge into J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, into Lewis' *Narnia*-cycle, or into a nineteenth century Russian novel, we know that we are in a different world, yet are becoming more and more accustomed to it by becoming

gradually familiar with its own logic. When we consider the need to become accustomed to a foreign world, we can see that use of the fantasy or fairytale genre is apologetically helpful to counterbalance the modern reduction of the world to what is visible and measurable. Lewis and his fellow-Inkling member J. R. R. Tolkien have done a great deal to rekindle the imagination as bridge to the world of the Gospel.²⁹

A main reason for the neglect of narrative in modern apologetics is probably that within a modernist framework narrative and argumentation are exclusive. Yet, they do not need to be mutually exclusive. Narrative rather embodies different types of argumentation. In Africa, I have several times experienced how narratives can be used in this way. When a debate entered into an impasse and when a conclusion needed to be reached, someone present told a parable, which either convincingly tipped over the balance in the debate or more often pointed to a solution in which the legitimate interests of both sides could be respected. The parable – or a well-chosen proverb – often evoked valid experience from a wholly different domain that unexpectedly shed light on the debated question.³⁰

The apologetic relevance of different domains of worldviews

Within the Christian metanarrative and worldview, the story of Jesus of Nazareth obviously is crucial. Christian apologetic witness should therefore be unashamedly Christocentric, for it is here that the meaning of world history and personal history uniquely intersect. We believe him to be the clue to reality, to our lives, to history, and to God. There are so many things which can and sometimes need to be addressed in apologetic dialogue: the nature of the universe, the value of the Bible, the human condition, the power of religion, the existence of God, the scope of scientific reasoning, and so on. Yet, among these there is one theme or rather person that remains at the centre of it all. This prevents the apologist from needing to say everything at once and from creating information overload. Apologetic dialogue is essentially witness to this person and an invitation to further personal discovery of what life with this Jesus entails and what the world with him at the centre looks like.³¹

When, in ever-widening circles around the person of Christ, we explore further domains of reality, some will require more attention than others. Some of

29 Cf. on the role of fantasy as a bridge to the Gospel: J. R. R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy Stories', in: Dorothy Sayers et al., *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 82-84.

30 The need for narrative in apologetic witness in non-western contexts is also noted by David K. Clark, 'Narrative Theology and Apologetics', *JETS* 36 (1993), 513; John A. Sims, 'Postmodernism: The Apologetic Imperative', in: David S. Dockery (ed.), *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 333.

31 With this communicative method of pointing people to clues for personal exploration rather than presenting a complete case, we follow the example of Jesus himself. See for example Matt. 22:41-45; cf. Charles H. Kraft, *Communicating Jesus' Way*, revised edition (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1999), 53f.

these domains are given with the nature of the Christian faith itself. We will soon need to start talking about God, for it is to him that Christ introduces us. In Christ we discover that God is not irrelevant or far-off; it is only in relationship with him that life in its fullness can be lived.

We will also soon start talking about the human condition. Christians believe that the basic problem of the human condition is given with the disparity between the high calling of the human being and the way he actually lives. All religions and worldviews that I know of provide some explanation of the human condition that is partly adequate and partly inadequate. These explanations need to prove their soundness precisely in the face of the enigma which we are to ourselves. As Blaise Pascal said:

Man's greatness and wretchedness are so evident that the true religion must necessarily teach there is in man some great principle of greatness and some great principle of wretchedness. It must also account for such amazing contradictions.³²

For most human beings the question of who they are and what they want to be touches on a central tension in their lives, thus creating need and openness for dialogue. Questions concerning the human condition will be considered not only by Christians but also by most non-Christians to be highly relevant and worth exploring.

Other crucial areas of exploration in apologetic dialogue will be determined by the particular interest of our conversation partners or of the particular communities, with which we are dealing. Dialogue with traditional Africans, for example, will have to deal particularly with questions of illness, healing, curses and protection, questions which are generally less urgent in a modern Western context. In a Muslim context one would need to deal particularly with the question of the relationship between the different alleged prophets and scriptures. In a Hindu context we cannot avoid questions of reincarnation and the afterlife. Dialogue with moderns will need to address the success of modern science.

Absorbing other perspectives

The truth of the Christian understanding of the world is shown even more clearly, when it does not simply provide an alternative understanding of reality, but an alternative from which the relative truth and falsity of the other worldviews can be understood and evaluated. It needs to become clear that from a Christian perspective one can make sense of both the relative truth and goodness and the limitations of alternative ways of living. As MacIntyre noted, it is because

32 Pascal, *Pensées*, # 149, cf. # 208 (Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, transl. A. J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin, 1966), 76, 96f = *Pensées*, in: Blaise Pascal, *Oeuvres Complètes*, Présentation et notes de Louis de Lafuma (Paris: Seuil, 1963), 520, 528f. For twentieth century versions of the same type of apologetic argument, one can point to: Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt: A Christian Anthropology* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1939); Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*, Volume 1: Human Nature (London: Nisbet & Co., 1941).

Einsteinian physics provides a new narrative in which the relative truth of Newtonian physics can be incorporated that it shows its greater verisimilitude.

When an epistemological crisis is resolved, it is by the construction of a new narrative which enables the agent to understand *both* how he or she could intelligibly have held his or her original beliefs *and* how he or she could have been so drastically misled by them. The narrative in terms of which he or she at first understood and ordered experiences is itself made into the subject of an enlarged narrative.³³

Integrating the relative truth of alternative worldviews is not simply a theoretical endeavour, but required for people in order to appropriate the Christian faith as whole people and to give their own past a proper place. Proper conversion presupposes an 'I', a person who is converted and who in important respects remains the same person before and after conversion.³⁴ This does not necessarily mean that one's past and former beliefs are all positively integrated as a prior apprehension of truth. They may be integrated as errors of which one now understands why one erred.³⁵ Yet, positive or negative, such integration is necessary for a sound and firm conversion. A past that is not integrated in the Christian present, will simply remain dormant till it presents – or avenges? – itself in unexpected ways. The influence of an unintegrated past is shown in the often unbalanced return to pre-Christian roots by many second generation Christians whose parents were converted in a context where little consideration was shown of their cultural heritage.³⁶

Though the validity of the Christian faith and the claims of Christ can 'in the final analysis' only be appreciated in terms of itself and of the reality which they open to us, this does not mean that the Christian world is a closed world with no way in. Looking for further means of persuasion, we will in the next sections explore the possibility of building cross-cultural bridges in order to prompt people to explore the Christian faith.

33 Alasdair MacIntyre, 'Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science', in: Gary Gutting (ed.), *Paradigms and Revolutions: Appraisals and Applications of Thomas Kuhn's Philosophy of Science* (Notre Dame/London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980), 56.

34 As missiologist Kenneth Cragg notes: "Given this integrity in Christ, there must also be integrity in conversion, a unity of the self in which one's past is genuinely integrated into present commitment. Thus, the crisis of repentance and faith truly integrates what we have been in what we become." (Kenneth Cragg, 'Conversion and Convertibility: With Special Reference to Muslims', in: John R. W. Stott & Robert Coote (eds.), *Down to Earth: Studies in Christianity and Culture, The Papers of the Lausanne Consultation on Gospel and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 194) Cf. from a philosophical point of view also Renford Bambrough, 'Fools and Heretics', in: A. Phillips Griffiths (ed.), *Wittgenstein Centenary Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 246f.

35 Cf. Berger & Luckmann, *Social Construction*, 179f.

36 Cf. Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 8f.

Exploiting bridgeheads

A variety of bridgeheads

In an important sense Christians and the non-Christians live in different worlds – and not just in two worlds, but in many. Nevertheless, in another significant sense the Christian and the non-Christian live in the same world, for they relate to the same extra-linguistic reality and their responses to this reality are influenced by their shared human nature. Thus we can expect some overlap between Christian and non-Christian conceptions of the world.

We find all sorts of common ground when meeting non-Christians, yet the common ground we find may vary widely from one case to another. This becomes clear when we try to imagine meeting a Muslim, a Buddhist, an adherent of African Traditional Religion, a modern atheist, and a postmodern pluralist. One can argue with a modern audience about the existence of God, starting from a particular area of common ground, such as in C. S. Lewis' argument starting from morality, or the argument from the fine-tuning of the universe, which recently became popular.³⁷ Such arguments have often been treated as if universal in their scope. They are not, however, and are better treated as directed to a specific modern Western audience. The problem of many classical modern apologies is not that they are not valid, but that they are only valid for a specific audience that shares a particular common ground and a particular approach to reality.³⁸ When such apologies do not recognise their limited validity, they overstate their case and neglect to look for the possibility that in dialogue with others completely different points of contact may be detected. With a traditional African audience one might start from the shared recognition of a Creator God and with Muslims one might add the belief in prophets, in revelation and in Jesus of Nazareth. With Zen-Buddhists the apologist may not share any of the previously shared convictions, but there is other common ground, such as the recognition that the highest vocation of the human being is not to be found in the visible world.

37 C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Glasgow: Collins, 1952), 15-34; Robin Collins, 'A Scientific Argument for the Existence of God: The Fine-Tuning Design Argument', in: Michael J. Murray (ed.), *Reason for the Hope Within* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 47-75.

38 Cf. Netland's evaluation of the apologies of C. S. Lewis and Francis Schaeffer (Harold Netland, 'Toward Contextualized Apologetics', *Missiology* 16 (1988), 296). The same narrowness of audience is oddly enough characteristic of the 'postmodern' apologies proposed by Nancey Murphy ('Postmodern Apologetics', particularly pp. 105, 108), Meredith B. Handspicker ('Toward a Postliberal Apologetics', *Journal of the Academy for Evangelism in Theological Education* 7 (1991-1992), 72-81) and Diogenes Alan (*Christian Belief in a Postmodern World: The Full Wealth of Conviction* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989)), who all three mainly address an audience impressed by science and the scientific method.

We can visualise this variation of common ground in apologetic dialogue with figure 1.

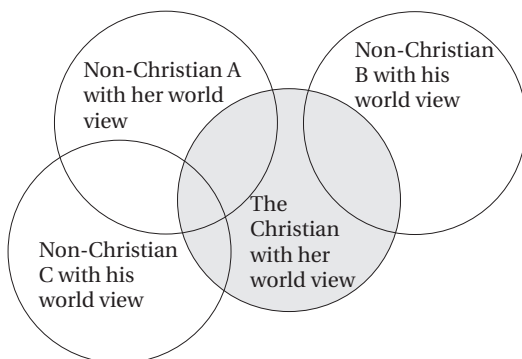


Figure 1: Common ground between Christians and non-Christians

Relevance

When we look for bridgeheads in other religions and worldviews from which bridges can be built to the Gospel, we will of course need to consider that some bridgeheads may be stronger and more important than others. We need to look for those that are closest to the centre of interest and of life. Many people may believe in the possibility of extra-terrestrial intelligence, which might function as a bridge for considering the possibility of being addressed from beyond. Yet, my feeling is that even for most people who would be open to this possibility, it is rather marginal to their lives and will not so easily impact their more central convictions and allegiances. For many Westerners today the feeling that certain forms of evil are utterly reprehensible and should fill us with justifiable indignation is, however, much more central to their experience of life. Though many have used the reality of evil as an argument against the existence of a good God, the experience of the indignation over evil is in fact a pointer to the existence of a personal and good God. Either in a naturalistic evolutionary universe or in a pantheist or monist universe, such an experience of the nature of evil should be dismissed as deceptive. The difficulty of dismissing such a strong, central, and basic awareness opens up the possibility for an argument for the existence of God based on the experience of evil.

When considering the central or peripheral character of certain convictions or experiences in a worldview, we need to take into account that worldviews are structured in terms of relevance.³⁹ We need to address people in terms of what

39 So Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction*, 59; cf. Guinness, *Reappraisal*, 322-325. A valid example of what attention for relevance in some non-western societies might mean can be found in: Marguerite H. Kraft, *Understanding Spiritual Power: A Forgotten Dimension of Cross-Cultural Ministry* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995).

they consider to be relevant for their lives, for apologetics is not only about truth, but also about relevance. If we want to gain a hearing, we need to address issues that are considered relevant to those whom we desire to hear the message. The Gospel invites us to take questions of relevance seriously, because it does not only talk about the truth of God, but about the salvation of humanity, knowing that both are intrinsically linked in Jesus who is both the truth and the life (John 14:6). Jesus himself related his message of the Kingdom of God to the most pressing needs of his audience.⁴⁰ We should be careful not to build our whole apologetic around the perception of needs, for many people may not feel an urgent need at a given moment.⁴¹ Yet we should be perceptive to listening to the real needs there are, realising that the message of Jesus and the apostles was also most welcomed by those who knew their need and could not hide it either for themselves or for others (Mark 2:17; 1 Cor. 1:26-31).

However, we must be careful here. What we experience as relevant and what we experience as our most important need do themselves reflect our worldview. The relationship between human needs and the divine answer therefore cannot be a simple relation of correlation as Paul Tillich proposed. In this correlation the needs were considered to be given on the human side and to be discovered by appropriate existential analysis. As a second step the Gospel should then be correlated to these needs.⁴² This understanding of correlation in the first place neglects the influence of sin, which obscures an understanding of our real needs. It furthermore overlooks the fact that the proposed existential analysis is the analysis of a particular form of human life as developed in the modern West and with the help of a method which is philosophically far from neutral. Other cultures and worldviews will have their own understanding of the most fundamental human needs. If we want to be heard, we must address our audience in terms of the needs they experience. Yet we may have to point out in the process that their felt needs are in need of reinterpretation and what they experience as most pressing may not be their most profound needs.⁴³ Their deepest needs are revealed by the Gospel.

Using antinomies

The role of tensions, anomalies and antinomies in inducing change

Those who have studied the development and interaction of different cultural linguistic frameworks have discovered that changes in worldview or a conversion from one worldview to another are most likely to occur when certain ten-

40 Cf. Kraft, *Anthropology*, 395, 398; *Communicating Jesus' Way*, 53.

41 So Guinness, *Reappraisal*, 371f.

42 Cf. Handspicker, 'Postliberal Apologetics', 72f.

43 Kraft, *Communicating Jesus' Way*, 49ff.

sions arise within a given understanding of reality. Such tensions can occur either because of growing tensions between different major areas of a certain cultural-linguistic framework or because of the confrontation with an aspect of reality that impinges on this framework and reveals certain inadequacies.

Thomas Kuhn has shown this to be the case in the world of science. When enough counter-instances appear that put the existing paradigm under pressure and push the more adventurous in the scientific community to look for alternative ways to understand the aspect of reality under scrutiny.⁴⁴

For our purposes, it is in this respect also revealing to consider Alasdair MacIntyre's study of the development of different traditions of moral rationality. Like Kuhn, MacIntyre stresses the role of crises in this process. MacIntyre's examples point to the fact that these crises are not only provoked by incongruent findings of research, but also by growing inner tensions in the development of a community's paradigm and by the confrontation with alternative paradigms.⁴⁵ An 'epistemological crisis' is a situation in which new discoveries and inner tensions provoked by social and cultural developments are accumulated to a degree that presses for change.⁴⁶ This change can either be brought by renewal within a certain tradition or by the abandonment of the given tradition for another available one that proves more adequate with respect to the given anomalies.⁴⁷

In the development of their sociology of knowledge, Berger and Luckmann also deal with 'crisis situations' that involve 'the risk of a breakdown of reality' – that is: reality as a social construction.⁴⁸ They highlight the role of the pressures of life, particularly those related to 'marginal situations'. These situations are precisely marginal, because they fall outside the scope with which the accepted symbolic universe ordinarily deals.⁴⁹ In a society that lives in a permanent 'denial of death',⁵⁰ the experience of death is a primary example of such a 'marginal situation'.⁵¹ Such 'marginal situations' both in the life of individuals

44 Kuhn, *Structure*, 6. One counter-instance or even a number of counter-instances is in itself not enough to entirely disprove a theory. This is where Popper's falsification theory was false (John Polkinghorne, *Rochester Roundabout: The Story of High Energy Physics* (Harlow: Longman, 1989), 170ff). A number of anomalies can just be ignored, trusting that they will be solved in the future, or can be dealt with by additional theories. This is the proper procedure, for scientific progress would not be possible if a whole tradition of research were immediately abandoned at the occasion of one counter-instance (Kuhn, *Structure*, 82). Yet, when too many anomalies present itself, one needs to start looking for alternative frameworks or paradigms, even if the number of paradigms that should bring us to abandon a paradigm cannot be set beforehand. Much hangs on the availability of a valid alternative.

45 MacIntyre, *Whose Justice?* 164–182, 349–369.

46 MacIntyre, 'Epistemological Crises'.

47 MacIntyre, *Whose Justice?* 362.

48 Berger & Luckmann, *Social Construction*, 175.

49 Berger & Luckmann, *Social Construction*, 114.

50 Cf. Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973).

51 Berger and Luckmann call death 'the marginal situation *par excellence* as 'the most terrifying to the taken-for-granted realities of everyday life'. (Berger & Luckmann,

and of a society put the given worldview under high pressure and create openness for change if other candidates are available. 'The validity of my knowledge of everyday life is taken for granted by myself and by others until further notice, that is until a problem arises that cannot be solved in terms of it.'⁵²

These analyses of basic changes of perspective in science (Kuhn), in practical philosophy (MacIntyre) and in the symbolic system that we receive in primary socialisation (Berger & Luckmann) help elucidate what happens in religious conversions. Many people experience moments of sudden or slowly mounting crisis in their (a-)religious perspective on life, which opens them up to a serious consideration of the Christian faith. This can happen in individual lives, such as when someone is confronted with death or enters a new phase of life like parenthood. It can also happen for a community or culture as a whole, when it goes through rapid changes with which the old worldview cannot adequately deal. Then they start looking for other ways of understanding reality that are more suited to the way the world is and to the condition in which we find ourselves. What does this mean for the apologist?

Tensions within worldviews and in people

The apologist needs to be alert for the tensions within worldviews or in the lives of the people living within certain communities that reveal the discrepancies between these worldviews and the way the world is. Such tensions can also be located in religions. Consider in Zen-Buddhism the relationship between the high moral awareness with the understanding of ultimate reality that surpasses the distinction between good and evil. This understanding of ultimate reality implies that 'While in a human, moral dimension the Holocaust should be condemned as an unpardonable, absolute evil, from the religious point of view even it should not be taken as an absolute but as a relative evil.'⁵³ This points to a serious tension or even inconsistency between the promotion of the moral life as a Buddhist ideal on the one hand and the concept of the ultimate reality, which undermines the validity of the very notion of good and evil.⁵⁴

Sometimes the tensions are of a more personal nature, when an individual who inhabits a certain worldview has experiences or develops convictions at odds with this worldview. This is movingly shown in the haiku of the Japanese

Social Construction, 119.) I think that this evaluation is typically modern and Western. In many societies in history and today life is very precarious and death far from marginal. Denying death is no option and that is precisely why a worldview that lives in denial of death would have little plausibility in Central Africa for example.

52 Berger & Luckmann, *Social Construction*, 58.

53 According to the Zen-Buddhist Masao Abe, 'Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata, in: John B. Cobb Jr. & Christopher Ives (eds.), *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990), 52f, quoted in Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism*, 307.

54 See for other tensions between the Buddhist metaphysics and ethics of self-less love: Stuart C. Hackett, *Oriental Philosophy: A Westerner's Guide to Eastern Thought* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), 106, 117f.

poet Issa (1762-1826), quoted by Os Guinness. This poet had a tragic life. First his five children died and then his wife also. This brought him to a Zen-master, whom he asked why all this happened to him. The Zen-master told him that this world is only evanescent dew. All our grief is only a sign that we are unable to overcome our egotistic bondage to this reality. As a response to that perspective, Issa wrote:⁵⁵

The world is dew -
 The world is dew -
 And yet,
 And yet...

This poem shows how Issa could not accept the answer, although it should make sense according to his worldview. This is one of those instances which shows that one is never entirely imprisoned by the symbolic universe one inhabits and that the world does not let itself knead *ad infinitum* within any given symbolic confines. The world was just too hard and in Berger's terms Issa was suffering an acute 'breakdown in reality'.⁵⁶ The apologist can use such anomalies, tensions and needs in cultures and in individual lives as bridges for the Gospel, as a trigger to start exploring the new world inaugurated by Christ.

Jesus Christ as the capstone

This apologetic use of tensions and anomalies should of course again avoid the pitfalls of manipulation and paternalism. Yet, the existence of these pitfalls does not mean that these tensions cannot be used in another way, as an introduction to an honest presentation of the faith and of Christ. We do after all believe that he is the answer to the inner tensions of life, which we believe to be caused by the loss of the centring of our lives on God. The apologetic exploration of cultural and human tensions does not just reflect an epistemic phenomenon revealed by Kuhn, MacIntyre and Berger. It is such a worthwhile apologetic procedure, because it is based on the fact that the human being who lives far from God and without Christ and lives in perpetual crisis inevitably ends up in a lot of tensions.

Sometimes these crises mount in major cultural debates and tensions and some of the best apologies have been those which exposed such tensions and showed their insurmountability without Christ, pointing to the Christian faith as the third way. Thus Blaise Pascal's *Pensées* exposed the tension between rationalists and sceptics, unveiling a mistaken understanding of the human nature and condition as their common fault and proposing a Christian understanding of the nature and destiny of man. *The Nature and the Destiny of Man* was equally the theme of Reinhold Niebuhr's Gifford lectures in which he contrasted rationalism and Romanticism and showed how the Christian faith makes sense of the short-

55 I. O. Guinness, *The Dust of Death: A Critique of the Establishment and Counter Culture – and a Proposal for a Third Way* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1973), 223.

56 Berger & Luckmann, *Social Construction*, 175.

comings of both. The same apologetic procedure reflects itself in the title of Os Guinness' analysis of the revolutions in the sixties of the twentieth century: *The Dust of Death: A Critique of the Establishment and Counter Culture – and a Proposal for a Third Way*. Comparable apologies could exploit the tensions in the contemporary world: between modernism and postmodernism, individualism and collectivism, naturalism and creative antirealism, between a sense of Western superiority and cultural relativism, secularism and the new quest for the sacred, between capitalism and environmentalism, the arts and the sciences, between the value of the family and pan-economism, and between sexuality and intimacy.

These examples mostly reflect those sectors of our globalised culture that are dominated by the West, yet similar tensions can be shown to exist in non-Western societies or societies on the edge of Western culture. We could, for example, single out the enormous tension between the need for protection against spiritual powers and the continued existence of fear characterising traditional Africa or the opposing tendencies of growing individualism and mounting ethnocentrism in modern-day Africa. We could equally point to the tensions between legalism and mysticism in Islam and between the conceptions of Muhammad as a mere man in contrast with a persistent tendency to sacralise him.

If one probes the world in which we live for traces of the fragmentation of the human being without God, the apologetic opportunities are multiple. Many of these tensions have been exposed in earlier apologetic work; yet analysing these tensions remains an ongoing project, not only for Christian writers, but also for Christians ministering as teachers and preachers in the pulpit, in the classroom, and in the media.

The apologist can of course not limit herself to uncovering and exposing the often hidden tensions that characterise cultures and ways of life. We need to bring people to begin doubting some of their old certainties, yet when we just expose the inconsistencies and anomalies, people might easily start to doubt what is most truthful in their belief-system. When we expose, for example, the tension between a respect for human rights and evolutionism, you could in principle conclude that human rights should be discredited – and some have done so. When you expose the tension in Buddhism between a strong sense of morality and the non-moral nature of the ultimate, any of both horns of the dilemma might come under pressure or one might – more likely – prefer to doubt the value of this type reasoning with regards to religious matters.

In order to avoid a mere impasse, we will need to point out that the most crucial antinomies can be solved, when Christ is brought into the centre of our life and worldview. We will need to show that what is most valuable in life finds its fulfilment, coherence and meaning in him. He is, in one of the Old Testament sayings that is more often quoted in the New 'the stone which the builders rejected' that yet 'has become the capstone' (Ps. 118:22f; Matt. 21:42; 1 Pet. 2:7). Only with him as the capstone, will the worldviews we construct become a coherent and solid whole. The apologist should aim for a sort of a "*Gestalt-switch*" in which it becomes apparent that all crucial aspects of the former worldview

suddenly fall in place and make much better sense, when they are rearranged and perceived from a different angle with Christ at the centre.⁵⁷

At this level we see how the three apologetic procedures of showing the validity of the whole, the building of bridges, and the unveiling of anomalies are not three different procedures but three aspects of one overall procedure. It is the anomalies that show the need look elsewhere. It is by building bridges that we show that the Christian faith is coherent with and the fulfilment of what is best and what is most true in the former worldview. It is the rearrangement of all these elements around Christ that reveals first and foremost the illuminating power of the whole picture.

Excursus: comparing worldviews and of the problem of the criteria

To elucidate the particularity of the apologetic method I have been proposing here, I want to compare it with an alternative method, the approach which in shorthand could be labelled 'worldview apologetics'. This apologetic approach envisages comparing different worldviews according to a number of criteria: logical coherence, consistency with knowledge in other fields, moral adequacy, etc.⁵⁸

The main strength of such a worldview approach is that it takes seriously the profound influence of our worldview on the way we experience the world, without yielding to relativism. The main limitation is that it lends too much weight to the criteria proposed to evaluate the different worldviews. The problem is not that such criteria are not universally *valid* or that they are not valid independent of any particular worldview. They are. Yet, they are not universally *recognised* as valid. This is shown by the example of certain Buddhists who reject the criterion of logical consistency, particularly when one wants to apply it to ultimate reality⁵⁹ or by the rejection of certain postmodernists of the criteria of logical consistency and of empirical fit.⁶⁰ This remains true even if one could make an argument that everyone *should* at least accept some logical principles⁶¹ or that

57 For the epistemological and apologetic value of the psychological concept of the "Gestalt-switch" see Kuhn, *Structure*, 204; Guinness, *Reappraisal*, 343.

58 E.g. Harold Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 183-195. The so-called two-stage apologetic that first tries to establish general theism on the basis of a comparison of worldviews and on that basis considers the historical data concerning Jesus of Nazareth, has, as far as the first stage is concerned, the same strengths and weaknesses. See for an example Norman Geisler, *Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976).

59 As conceded within the context of a defence of context-independent-criteria in Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism*, 293.

60 Cf. the criticism of Mark C. Taylor in Paul D. Feinberg, 'Cumulative Case Apologetics', in: Steven B. Cowan (ed.), *Five Views on Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 167-172.

61 As argued by Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, 141ff.

everyone *implicitly* accepts an idea of correspondence even while openly rejecting it.⁶² All this only underscores that those criteria are not given *a priori*, but need in some cases to be themselves the object of discussion. Such criteria can only *a posteriori* be discovered to be indeed universally valid and adequate for comparing worldviews and knowledge claims.⁶³

Though defenders of a worldview approach may recognise this *a posteriori* character of these criteria and are be willing to defend them, the apologetic implications of this concession are often missed. If these criteria for comparing worldviews are not *a priori* given, but to be discovered in the process, I can still use them apologetically, when my audience accepts them. Yet, then I may likewise use other truths that are universally true, though not universally recognised, but shared by my specific audience. So in that respect all truths are on par with one another as far as their apologetic value is concerned. There is therefore no reason to give these allegedly context-independent criteria for judging worldviews an apologetic value over other points of contact we may find in specific audiences. As human beings we generally commit ourselves more strongly to other ideas or values that are more specific for our community, than to some abstract criteria. Average Muslims are probably more strongly committed to the prophet Muhammad and to their belief in the oneness of God than to any abstract criterion. They might easily be brought to give up an abstract criterion if it implied that they should deny their prophet or their God.

What remains of worldview apologetics is a defence of the Christian worldview, valid for a very specific audience, which may be mostly found in limited Western intellectual milieus which considers that it is a valid procedure to evaluate worldviews in a disengaged manner according to an abstract procedure. In all the other cases other points of contact maybe more viable. The evaluation of worldviews according to such criteria can also function as an important *confirmation* for Christians who are understandably troubled by the multiplicity of worldviews. Yet, also for Christians their commitment to the Christian worldview is not *based* on such an abstract comparison, but rather on an encounter with Christ. All human thinking, including the criteria we propose to evaluate worldviews, should be brought under his Lordship (2 Cor. 10:4).

Abstract

This article argues that Christian apologetic witness should be understood as cross-cultural persuasion rather than as an effort to justify the Christian faith

62 As argued by Feinberg, 'Cumulative Case Apologetics', 170f; Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism*, 296.

63 Cf. for a more philosophical analysis of the *a posteriori* nature of the basic criteria that we use to distinguish truth and error: Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 160-171; Roderick M. Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge*, third edition (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1989), 6f; Alvin Plantinga, 'Reason and Belief in God', in: Alvin Plantinga & Nicholas P. Wolterstorff (eds.), *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 74-78.

in terms of a supposedly universal rationality. It begins by exploring barriers to such cross-cultural persuasion related to human nature, the nature of worldview and of the way communities deal with objections to their way of life. It then explores three mutually reinforcing possibilities for cross-cultural persuasion. (1) Exposing tensions and antinomies in cultures, worldviews and life styles shows the need to explore alternatives. (2) Building bridges to relevant culture and worldview-specific points of contact shows that the Christian faith is coherent with and the fulfilment of what is best and what is most true in the former worldview. (3) The rearrangement of all these elements around Christ reveals the illuminating power of the whole Christian way of life in this world.

Re: Mission

A Vision of Hope for a Post-Eschatological Church

Andrew Perriman

In this innovative and radical book postmodern mission and New Testament studies collide. Andrew Perriman examines the mission of the earliest church in its historical context and argues that our context is very different and so our mission cannot simply be a matter of doing exactly what the earliest church did. The key question at the heart of the book is, "How do we shape a biblical theology of mission for a post-biblical church?" Controversially Perriman maintains that the eschatological crisis faced by the early church – the coming judgment on the enemies that opposed God's people – has now passed with the collapse of the Roman Empire! Eschatology, says Perriman, is about temporary transitions from oppression to deliverance in the history of the people of God. However, creational disorder is with us all the time. The postmodern church does not face an eschatological crisis but a creational crisis. A missiology that is oriented towards a new creation is far more relevant to us now than a missiology oriented, as it was in most of the New Testament, towards rescue from opposition and persecution.

Andrew Perriman lives in Holland and works with Christian Associates seeking to develop open, creative communities of faith for the emerging culture in Europe. He is author of *The Coming of the Son of Man: New Testament Eschatology for an Emerging Church*.

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