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Truth, Subjectivism and the Art of Apologetics

In this wide-ranging analysis, Paul Weston faces up to a critical question. In contemporary western culture, 'doing what feels right for me' has become for many people the guiding principle. As older assumptions about objective truth break down into postmodern uncertainty, how should we proclaim the gospel?

The reality of subjectivism

We live in a world where the dominance of the subjective is highly influential and powerful. Its spiritual role models are those such as Shirley MacLaine, who describes her own New Age spirituality as 'all about feeling, not thinking'.[1] Alain Finkielkraut sums up the mood of our age when he writes: 'We live in an *age* of feelings. Today there is no more truth or falsehood, no stereotype or innovation, no beauty or ugliness, but only an infinite array of pleasures, all different and all equal.'[2]

Words such as these have a very contemporary ring about them. But they also pose some very serious challenges to Christian apologists. How do we go about communicating the gospel in a postmodern world? Do older methods still work, or are our methods out of date? And if older approaches no longer work, what new styles ought we to be adopting – and on what basis?

This article begins to address some of these issues by exploring one aspect of our postmodern culture – its emphasis upon the subjective. By looking at the roots of this emphasis and then examining how Evangelicals have responded to cultural change more generally, I hope to highlight some of the issues which apologists need to address as they seek to communicate with a new generation. We begin by looking at the roots of subjectivism, both to see how we got to where we are and also as a prelude to asking whether our responses have to some extent been shaped by the journey.

1 Quoted in J. Drane, *Faith in a Changing Culture: Creating Churches for the Next Century*, Marshall Pickering, London 1997, p 32.

2 Quoted in C. E. Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1993, p 105.

Root 1: Philosophical

The whole development of twentieth-century philosophical thought has tended to establish that the source of any knowledge about reality is to be found *within* individuals rather than outside of them. Moreover, it can be shown that this transition from the objective to the subjective as the locus of knowledge has paradoxically been the result of the so-called age of 'Enlightenment', whose central contention was that it was indeed possible for human beings to acquire an objective and certain kind of knowledge *outside* of the self.

Long before this century, René Descartes' famous works *Discourse on the Method* (1637),[3] and the *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641) had sought to provide the basis for such knowledge. He originally wrote them in order to safeguard the rational certainty of faith in a traditional and orthodox conception of God. But in elevating the role of reason above revelation as the means by which true knowledge was to be found, Descartes ultimately made possible both the subversion of religion and the contemporary critique of his Enlightenment method.[4] For once he had established grounds other than those of revelation upon which truth claims could alone be established and verified, two things inevitably followed. First, the relationship between revelation and reason became reversed, so that now the autonomous self (by the use of reason rather than faith) became the final arbiter and judge of all truth. But secondly, once thinkers began to apply Descartes' criterion that nothing could be shown to be true unless the position from which such a judgement was being made could not *itself* be doubted, the possibility arose that the position from which this second judgement was being made could *itself* be doubted. Once this process began, the search for 'truth' inevitably proved to be never-ending.

It was Friedrich Nietzsche who saw the reality of this 'Cartesian' *impasse* perhaps most clearly. He argued at the end of the last century that the methods of the 'Enlightenment' (with their tendency towards grand 'unifying' ideas) could not make sense of the chaos and fragmentation of life, but would lead ultimately only to despair, and to belief in nothing. In this sense, he can be seen as the father of what has loosely come to be known today as the 'culture of postmodernity'.

> Representative of this newer culture are writers such as Michel Foucault and Jean-François Lyotard. In the light of modernity's manifest failure to explain the world in a way which legitimates freedom, both argue that what actually exists as an explanation of the world and its history is not one 'grand' narrative, but many lesser ones, none of which can claim to be ultimately true for everybody. It is a view which Lyotard summarizes in his celebrated and oft-quoted statement, 'Simplifying to the extreme I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives.'[5]

3 Full title: *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting One's Reason and Seeking the Truth in the Sciences.*

4 It remains one of the tragic ironies of Descartes' project that what he originally wrote to safeguard a biblical conception of God subsequently became one of modernity's greatest allies in subverting such a faith. See B. Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry*, Pelican, Harmondsworth 1978, p 162.

5 J. F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, tr. G. Bennington & B. Massumi, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1984, p xxiv.

The picture that emerges from these writers is one in which 'truth' functions merely at a localized level – whether in the 'power-discourses' of Foucault, or the 'language games' of Lyotard (in which individuals may inhabit differing spheres of truth-reference at different times). In this scenario, individual communities sustain and create their own narratives, and each narrative represents the 'truth' only as it is for that community at any particular stage in their history. There is therefore a locality, a fluidity, even a 'chaos' about this concept of 'truth' which takes us near to the heart of postmodern thinking. In fact, David Harvey has written that 'the most startling fact about postmodernism (is) its total acceptance of the ephemerality, fragmentation, discontinuity, and the chaotic'. He goes on, 'It does not try to transcend it, counteract it, or even to define the "eternal and immutable" elements that might lie within it. Postmodernism swims, even wallows, in the fragmentary and the chaotic currents of change as if that is all there is.'[6]

Such a reconstruction – at least in general terms – is one which has won adherents across many different disciplines, not least amongst radical theologians. Don Cupitt, for example, has written that, 'Postmodernity is a flux of images and fictions'.[7] As a result, 'truth' is 'human, socially-produced, historically developed, plural and changing'.[8]

The development of thought from the grand 'certainties' of modernity to the more localized and altogether less certain possibilities of postmodernity serves therefore to underline a movement from the objective to the subjective as the place in which any concept of 'truth' for the individual is to be found. If the Enlightenment dream – that the truth is 'out there' – is after all a fantasy, then individuals are inevitably thrown back upon themselves. If there is no such thing as 'objective truth', then subjective opinions are all that are left.

Root 2: Sociological

It is not only philosophers who have sought to articulate these changes. Sociologists of religion point to the impact of both modernity and postmodernity on the emergence of a culture in which religious pluralism has become the norm. They point out that in a multi-cultural context, in which different faiths jostle with each other and in which each is potentially relativized in the process, the nature of religious faith itself changes dramatically.

Emerging from a pre-modern world in which one belief system tended to predominate, the new context brings a variety of possible religious expressions into view. This poses a threat to traditional belief systems by presenting new challenges to their versions of reality. It also brings a new dilemma to the consciousness of the individual. As Peter Berger puts it, 'Religious affirmations percolate from the level of taken-for-granted certainty to the level of mere belief, opinion, or... "religious preference".' He goes on, 'The pluralistic situation not only allows the individual a choice, it forces him to choose.'[9]

6 D. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Social Change*, Blackwell, Oxford 1994, p 44.

7 D. Cupitt, *Creation out of Nothing*, SCM Press, London 1990, p 77.

8 Cupitt, *Creation*, p 45.

9 P. L. Berger, *A Rumour of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural*, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1970, p 62.

Berger subsequently traces the connection between pluralism as 'choice' and its inevitable consequence in increasing the emphasis upon the subjective side of our personalities. Writing some years ago, he argues, 'Modernization has brought with it a strong accentuation of the subjective side of human existence; indeed, it may be said that modernization and subjectivization are cognate processes.' He concludes that under modern (and we might add *post*-modern conditions), 'The individual comes to experience himself as being alone in a way that is unthinkable in traditional society – deprived of the firm solidarity of his collectivity, uncertain of the norms by which his life is to be governed, finally uncertain of who or what he is.'[10] The necessity of choice merely serves to underline the individuality and subjectivity of the chooser.

Root 3: Technological

Alongside these influences a third has also become increasingly significant: namely the impact of television. For in a consumer society (as Neil Postman has so brilliantly argued), television has transformed the nature of public debate by the way in which its programme producers are obliged to entertain rather than to engage. 'What I am claiming', Postman writes 'is not that television is entertaining but that it has made entertainment itself the natural format for the representation of all experience... The problem is not that television presents us with entertaining subject matter but that all subject matter is presented as entertaining, which is another matter altogether.'[11] It is a comparatively small step in this process to the kind of overt statement made by Bob Pittman, the founder of the American cable channel MTV (Music Television), in describing the philosophy behind his network: 'What we've introduced with MTV is non-narrative form... We rely on mood and emotion. We make you feel a certain way as opposed to you walking away with any particular knowledge.'[12]

As a result of these developments, Roger Lundin goes so far as to characterize the postmodern as a 'solitary soul couched in front of the television set, seeking satisfaction for unspecified needs and ineffable desires'. He goes on, 'in the modern world the ideal of the self disinterestedly seeking truth has given way to a vision of the self as a unit of consumption seeking to slake its unquenchable thirsts.'[13]

These three intertwined roots have had an immense and profound influence on our contemporary society both as cultural indicators and social engineers. Moreover, each of them has also helped to underline the subjectivity of the postmodern world in which we are called to communicate the gospel. So as we move now to consider the issue of apologetics, how should we respond to such changes, and to the culture of which they are a part?

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10 P. L. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation*, Collins, London 1980, p 23.

11 N. Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, Viking Penguin, New York 1985, p 87.

12 Quoted in J. R. Middleton and B. J. Walsh, *Truth is Stranger than it Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age*, SPCK, London 1995, p 55.

13 R. Lundin, *The Culture of Interpretation: Christian Faith and the Postmodern World*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1993, pp 249-250.

Responding to cultural change

We begin this section with a central question about the relationship between 'gospel' and 'culture'. Which of them ultimately drives the apologetic enterprise? Does our subjective culture have such an impact upon the way that we think, that in the end its presuppositions subtly determine the way in which we evangelize? And might this actually be a good thing? Or should the gospel set the agenda for our methodologies of apologetics and evangelism? And if this is the case, precisely what might this look like in practice?

We shall attempt to address some of these issues by using as a framework three categories of response to cultural change outlined by Peter Berger.[14] Although he applies these to the changes brought about by the onset of 'modernity' rather than postmodernity, they nonetheless provide a useful framework for addressing responses to any form of cultural change.

The 'reductive' option ('Go with the flow')

Berger's describes his first option as 'reductive'. It is marked, he writes, by 'an exchange of authorities: The authority of modern thought or consciousness is substituted for the authority of the tradition...modern consciousness and its alleged categories become the only criteria of validity for religious reflection.'[15] In other words, under this response to cultural change, culture calls the shots.

Many would perhaps immediately distance themselves from such a sell-out to the prevailing cultural mood, particularly as Berger goes on to use Rudolf Bultmann's 'demythologizing' programme as a typical example of what happens when the 'cognitive bargaining' process between traditional religious belief and contemporary culture issues in victory for contemporary culture. For Bultmann argued that when elements within the religious tradition are considered to be no longer culturally acceptable, they must either be rejected or recast in more culturally acceptable terms.[16]

Before we move on, however, consider this conversation witnessed recently on an evangelistic mission:

Christian: 'If you come to Jesus and give your life to him, he will meet all your needs.'

Non-Christian: 'But I haven't got any needs. My life is going pretty well thank you.'

Christian: 'But you must have *some* needs in your life which you haven't had met?'

Non-Christian: 'No, I don't think so.'

It is of course easy to caricature this style of apologetic. It is true that Jesus *will* truly meet a person's every need. But the manner in which he will do this may

14 Berger, *Heretical Imperative*, pp 66-156.

15 Berger, *Heretical Imperative*, p 62.

16 Bultmann argued that not only the general background of the NT but also the central events of the faith (e.g. the atonement, resurrection and ascension) were originally couched in mythological terms. If Christianity depended upon these things in its proclamation then it was *erledigt* ('finished'), because 'modern man' could no longer believe in such fantasies.

be in a different frame of reference from the one assumed by the listener at this particular point in the evangelistic enterprise. It is also true to say that the *felt* needs of the listener have often constituted an effective bridge for a presentation of the good news about Jesus which has gone on to meet the listener's real need.

But my point here is slightly different. For what is more serious about this example is that it represents rather uncomfortably the methodological assumption behind many forms of contemporary evangelical apologetic. This assumption can be put in the following way: I can only evangelize people who have a 'felt need' for the gospel. Or, to put it the other way around: If people don't have a 'felt need' for the gospel that I can 'tap into', then the gospel has nothing to say to them.

The example is worth pondering precisely because it has been moulded so much by the assumptions of our subjectivist culture. An idea becomes true for me to the extent to which it meets my perceived needs. So where there are no perceived needs, no evangelism can take place. As a result, the gospel cloth – in a manner rather uncomfortably similar to that of Bultmann – is re-cut to fit the cultural suit.

However, at a deeper philosophical level there is an emerging approach to apologetics that ultimately takes the same reductive approach. We are told by postmodern thinkers that every conception of reality is a 'narrative' which ultimately represents only the beliefs of its localized adherents. It may carry validity within that locality, but it cannot be put forward on a wider scale as *the* grand explanation of the way things are. Such a perspective cuts two ways for the would-be apologist. On the one hand it acknowledges that any personal world-view is a valid belief-option, but on the other it disqualifies anybody from maintaining that such a viewpoint is anything *other* than a personal one. It is localized. It cannot be universal. I cannot therefore seek to win anybody to my view of reality if I am assuming that it ultimately represents the only valid one.

Under rules such as these, Christianity gains credibility at one level (i.e., it is a narrative legitimately owned by its adherents – in this case Christians), but loses it altogether at the higher level (i.e., one cannot say that it is anything *more* than one explanation, nor claim any overarching truth for it).

In responding to this sort of analysis, some apologists want to accept that since we have now moved into a postmodern era, we can no longer articulate the gospel as 'true' in the sense in which we used to. We can only put our faith forward as *one* truth amongst many; and because we can no longer affirm the gospel as anything other than one of a number of different accounts of reality, all we can expect to do is to pitch in our account and do something akin to 'hoping for the best'. In one sense this may be acknowledged as a progression from the environment of 'modernity' in which religious accounts of reality were often dismissed altogether. But it comes with an ultimate price; a price that bars truth at the universal level and in doing so ends up sitting rather uncomfortably with the NT apostolic witness.

The 'inductive' option ('Fan any potential faith flame!')

Berger's second response to cultural change is one he describes as 'inductive'. This he writes, 'is to turn to experience as the ground of all religious affirmations – one's

own experience to whatever extent this is possible, and the experience embodied in a particular range of traditions'.[17]

It is the approach that Berger himself advocates as the most constructive and hopeful response to the challenge of cultural change. In proposing it, he builds on the insights of his theological mentor, Friedrich Schleiermacher. 'The bedrock of his theological enterprise', he writes, 'was a grounding of Christian faith in a more general human phenomenon of religious experience.'[18] However, he warns that an application of this approach will involve, 'a re-evaluation of the Christian tradition from an inductive viewpoint "to uncover the experiential substrata of the tradition". This must be done in relation to itself and also to other religious traditions. There are risks in this programme, but never to *faith*. This is the way ahead.'[19] In other words, Berger wants hereby to retain some sense to the idea of the 'universal truthfulness' of religious faith, but sees that the only way to do this is to universalize the religious experiences by which different world faiths are *expressed*, rather than try to find common points of *content*.

Such a route is already being commonly espoused, not least within the educational establishment. Here any expression of faith must be safeguarded, even nurtured, and any form of proselytism to a particular creed studiously avoided. But whilst this approach has its rightful advocates as a way of teaching religious studies in a multi-cultural society, it remains flawed as a proposal which might ultimately unite the world's religions. For despite Berger's desire to retain some substance to the notion of 'universal religious truth', his proposal to ground that truth in some form of general human experience ultimately degenerates the content of faith to its lowest common experiential denominator. For example, by assuming the universality of religious experience as the essential component of such a faith, he immediately excludes the possible veracity of any exclusive truth claim being made by particular religious traditions, whether Christian, Muslim or whatever. This will encounter insuperable problems, not least the unlikelihood of any such concessions being made by Christians, Muslims, and many others. The reason for this is that at an epistemological level, it is impossible within many different streams of religious tradition ruled by some form of 'revelation' to divorce the notion of truth from its metaphysical impartation *within* that tradition. One of the interesting questions underlying Berger's proposal therefore remains: by what criteria are these particular confessional truth claims being excluded?[20]

As with the 'reductive' option, many will therefore want to reject this second response as simply an impossibility. But before we pass on, we should note that the pressure for what Berger calls the 'grounding of Christian faith' in 'religious experience', is one with which believers (not least Evangelicals) have constantly flirted. In the context of our discussion of a cultural trend towards subjectivism, it represents another pressure which will constantly be exerted upon the church. As

17 Berger, *Heretical Imperative*, pp 62f.
18 Berger, *Heretical Imperative*, p 69.
19 Berger, *Heretical Imperative*, p 186.
20 See the incisive article by S. D. Gaede, 'Excursus: The Problem of Truth', in J. D. Hunter and S. C. Ainlay, eds, *Making Sense of Modern Times: Peter L. Berger and the Vision of Interpretative Sociology*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1986, pp 159-75.

Bryan Wilson put it some years ago, 'Inner feeling has been widely hailed as more authentic than intellectual knowledge.... It should not surprise us if, against the general background of secularization, the one 'growth sector' within the churches and within institutionalised religion should mobilize the same dispositions and offer the same rewards.'[21]

Amongst some evangelistic strategies the concentration upon 'telling our stories' and 'giving our testimonies' is perhaps an example of this trend. For whilst the telling of such stories is an entirely proper and valuable exercise, an emphasis upon such testimonies as the *primary* means of evangelism will lead to verificational difficulties. ('I'm so glad that you have found peace and fulfilment through your faith. My own faith in _____ does that for me too.')

Ultimately of course (and thankfully) the content of the good news is not confined to – nor dependent upon – my experience of it, but rather upon what God has done objectively to make such experience a possibility. It is noteworthy in this connection that the Scriptures neither decry experience as a necessary component of faith, nor divorce such experiences from the events which made them possible. The objective and the experiential are held together. The reality of neither is denied, but each is related to the other in a way that anchors the subjective and appropriated reality of God's supernatural work in the life of the believer to the objective appearance in history of his Son Jesus. Once Christian experience is divorced from the events which give rise to it, it becomes impossible to distinguish it from other manifestations of religious experience. This of course would appear to be the substance of Berger's proposal, but it is a move which is neither biblical nor logical.

The 'deductive' option ('Keep doing what we've always done')

Berger's final response is one he describes as 'deductive'. When the nature of an outside revealed authority is seen to be called into question by cultural change, the 'deductive' response is to 'reassert the authority of a religious tradition in the face of modern secularity.... The individual who takes this option experiences himself as responding to a religious reality that is sovereignly independent of the relativizations of his own sociohistorical situation.'[22]

Whereas Evangelicals will probably reject both the first two options, this third presents an approach which is broadly attractive. For while neither the 'reductive' nor the 'inductive' option fits easily with the NT picture of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ as being his final word, the 'deductive' option does indeed begin to get close to it. We do believe that in Jesus the world has seen God's final word. We do believe in a religious reality that is 'sovereignly independent of the relativizations of (our) own sociohistorical situation'. The 'deductive' option appears rightly therefore to maintain a commitment to the gospel as an objective revelation of truth whilst emphasizing our continuing need to proclaim and defend it as such.

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21 B. Wilson, *Contemporary Transformations of Religion*, Oxford University Press, London 1976, p 37.

22 Berger, *Heretical Imperative*, p 61.

Apologetics in a subjective culture

How might Berger's 'deductive' option be applied in the context of the culture we have been describing? At one level, the straightforward application of it might be one which underlines the importance of continuing to proclaim the gospel and continuing to engage in apologetics in the ways in which they have always been done.

I have no intrinsic problem with this general position, but I do think that it is important to use the process of cultural change to think hard about the methods we have traditionally employed. For the danger inherent in 'doing what we have always done' is that we never review the presuppositions underlying the methodologies we adopt. And it could be argued that some of these methods have become so much a part of our evangelical heritage that we fail to think about them. The remainder of the article will therefore explore one such area.[23]

Evangelism and the framework of apologetics

One of the results of the onset of postmodernity is that some 'traditional' methods of apologetic appear no longer to have the same 'cash value' as they used to. Evidentialist arguments for the historical reliability of the resurrection, for example, no longer seem to get us very far with *post*-moderns as we thought they did with 'moderns'. Whereas, say, 15 years ago, acceptance of the historical basis of the resurrection was felt to be the point at which non-Christians simply had to capitulate and become Christians, now they are more likely to respond along the lines of, 'So what?' Whereas 15 years ago people needed persuading about the *possibility* of the supernatural, nowadays the average viewer of *The X-Files* has no problem with such things. In many cases people are obsessed with them and will reel off ten occasions on which the supernatural has directly impinged upon their personal lives. I caricature to make the point, but the point still stands.

When we reflect therefore upon the effect of Enlightenment ideals on the development of apologetic strategies and methods, we need to be critically reflective. Was it the case, for example, that the classic evidentialist defence of the reliability of the resurrection, with its appeal to 'reason' and 'evidence', formed a *necessary* evangelical defence of the gospel, or simply a culturally appropriate one? Do the NT authors set out to persuade in this way, or are they more concerned to persuade on other grounds?

Whatever our answers to such questions (and they are important ones), my point here is that inherent in some evidentialist methods lurks the tendency to believe that rational argument can win the day. To put it more bluntly: in reaction against the prevailing subjectivism of our culture, some styles of evangelical apologetic have been in danger of falling prey to the ruling Cartesian assumption of the Enlightenment that truth can be established by objective criteria which are within the reach of a rational mind.

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23 In what follows, I am indebted to the stimulus of Lesslie Newbigin, who first made me think through some of these issues in detail.

In practice, this assumption works itself out in a variety of ways. But behind them lies an assumption that the gospel itself can be viewed and weighed up from some neutral exterior vantage point and established from this vantage point to be true by the neutral and objective observer. In the patterns of apologetic which tend to develop from this belief, Christian apologists see both themselves and their non-Christian hearers as standing *outside* the sphere of the gospel, and understand their role as seeking to commend the gospel to their unbelieving friends and to persuade them of its coherence on the basis of its inherent 'reasonableness'. 'Can't you see with me that the gospel makes sense?' Once this 'reasonableness' is considered to be the key component in the weighing up of the gospel's claims, then the kind of evidentialist arguments for the plausibility of the resurrection accounts, for the historical existence of the man Jesus, for the reliability of the gospels, and so on, will become key components in any ensuing strategy of apologetics.

I am not seeking here to decry the value of all types of 'evidentialist' apologetics, but simply to raise a question about one of the assumptions involved: namely *that there exists some independent standpoint from which systems of belief about reality may be judged and evaluated.* This of course was the dream of the Enlightenment; but it is a dream that has largely evaporated, as we have seen. Moreover, my own experience as an apologist has been to find myself intellectually stranded whenever I have tried to establish such claims on postmodern minds.

At this point we might proceed along two parallel and complementary paths. The first is to ask ourselves the basic question: on what grounds *am* I seeking to commend the gospel of Jesus Christ, and how far do I believe these grounds will get me? My own experience over the years has been that whilst I may get some way towards producing 'theists' and 'deists' by the arguments of reason, I will never get very far in the business of producing Christians. The reason for this is very straightforward. The heart of the Christian faith is actually rather *un*-reasonable. The idea that God should come into the world in the form of Jesus Christ and die on a cross for the sake of fallen humanity remains for most postmoderns (and 'moderns' for that matter) both a 'stumbling block' and even 'foolishness' – just as it did for first-century Jews and Greeks.[24] This is not to say, of course, that the gospel is ultimately unreasonable. But it is to say that it is properly 'reasonable' only within its *own* biblical framework and that this 'reasonableness' is comprehended only by a mind which has been divinely enlightened and converted by the gospel itself.

The second path along which we might proceed therefore is to try to develop patterns of evangelism and apologetics which proceed from a *gospel* starting point rather than some supposedly 'external' and 'neutral' one. On this basis, rather than seeking to persuade non-Christians of the rational attractiveness of the Christian faith from some supposedly neutral vantage point which they are also thought to occupy, I am increasingly convinced that apologetics has to be done from *within the revelational framework of the gospel itself.* In fact, I believe that there is a strong case that this is the predominant mode of apologetic found within the NT itself.

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24 Cf. 1 Cor. 1:18-25; 2:14; 3:19.

For rarely, if ever, do we find what might be called an 'evidentialist' argument being employed in an evangelistic context. On the contrary, what we can only describe as a 'revelational' apologetic seems to predominate.

Two examples will have to suffice. Both of them are taken from the gospel accounts of the resurrection. First, if we were to ask at what level Luke's portrayal of the resurrection functions apologetically, we would have to conclude that it presupposes just this sort of 'revelational' understanding of God's actions within history (either as spoken by the scriptures or by Jesus himself) as the basis for a right understanding of the resurrection itself.[25] The disciples (and also the subsequent readers of the gospel) are told that they will only have access to the truth about the resurrection once they have begun to understand the nature and content of this revelation.

Or take John's 'resurrection' chapter. It concludes with the appearance of the risen Jesus to 'doubting Thomas' and with the mild rebuke directed at his lack of faith ('Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe').[26] As a result of this encounter, the reader is left pondering the enticing question which is raised by the literal seeing of Jesus' risen body by the disciples. How *will* those who have not physically seen Jesus in the flesh, be able to 'see' Jesus in a way that enables them to believe in him and have eternal life? The evidentialist response that they will 'see' once they have been persuaded that they can trust the eyewitness evidence of the disciples who originally saw is only partially true. The fuller answer given by John is one which constitutes the climax of the gospel: they will come to see and believe as John's gospel narrative itself is retold to them ('These things are written that you may believe...').[27] In other words, the contemporary path to 'seeing' and apprehending the truth about Jesus is once more via an exposure to the divine revelation about him which constitutes the gospel.[28]

Let me try to take this thought further in very practical terms. For some years now, I have attempted to engage in a more 'revelational' style of apologetics by seeking to frame answers to the questions which non-Christians ask using the words of Jesus himself. I found that hitherto my natural response to such questions had been to respond along the lines: 'It's interesting you say that. What *I think* is that...' What followed was usually a discussion (or an argument) which functioned at the level of assumptions or presuppositions and was one in which my own arguments were pitted more or less effectively against those of my hearer. This approach sometimes engaged the mind, but – more importantly from the point of view of evangelism – rarely focused on the gospel. As a result of these experiences, I began to attempt to erase the 'I think...' part of the responses, and begin my replies with

25 Luke 24:5-7, 25-27, 32, 44ff.

26 John 20:29.

27 John 20:31. Note how this statement immediately follows the Thomas incident, with its climax at v 29. This 'secondary seeing' is hereby validated by Jesus as being in no way inferior to the 'seeing' of those who were physically present.

28 It is interesting that much contemporary evangelistic discussion course material prefers to approach the question of Jesus' resurrection by a rational/evidentialist route rather than by the one outlined here.

something along the lines of, 'It is interesting that you say that... *Jesus* was once asked a similar question and *he* said...', or 'That's an interesting situation you describe... *Jesus* was once involved in a similar situation and *his* response was...'

A number of things began to emerge from such an approach. I certainly got to the gospel quicker, and found that conversations as a result did not end up playing around the presuppositional edge of conflicting world-views. (I also found along the route that Jesus was a brilliant evangelist.) But, at the level of method, I realized that this approach represented the substance of what, as an evangelist in any cultural setting, I was increasingly wanting to present. For I came to believe that the only legitimate starting point for gospel apologetics is the revelation of the gospel itself – a revelation which coheres around and centres upon Jesus Christ. So on this view, evangelism (or 'gospel apologetics') is any method which allows Jesus Christ to bear witness to himself.

In this sense, Alasdair MacIntyre was right when he stated in one of his early essays that, 'Belief cannot reason with unbelief: it can only preach to it'.[29] This is not to suggest a 'soap box' style of evangelism which neither listens to, nor attempts to interact with a non-believer's world-view. On the contrary, it will mean that we will need to work harder at our understanding of cultural issues in order to understand them *in the light of revelation* and therefore be able in conversation to bring the light of the gospel to bear upon them. This appears to have been Jesus' own apologetic style: a dynamic ability to get to the heart of the issue at hand, and an ability to critique and reorientate that issue in the light of the Kingdom and its coming King.

As our culture therefore makes an increasing transition towards the subjectivity of 'postmodernity', methods of apologetic which rely upon certain 'Enlightenment' foundations will be likely to become increasingly culturally marooned. The temptation in some quarters will be to continue strategies which assume certain rationalistic presuppositions to be in place amongst our hearers. In other quarters it will be to side with the postmodernists and risk falling prey to the cultural assumptions – this time of *post*-modernity (thus becoming culturally marooned once more). My argument has been that cultural change should cause us to reconsider the question of what constitutes 'gospel' apologetics in *any* cultural context.

Conclusion

This article has been about the nature and communication of religious truth in a culture which threatens to deny its existence in all but a subjective way. It has also been about the ways in which Christians respond to the challenges which such a culture generates. Berger's three possible responses to cultural change present the opportunity for reflection in these vitally important areas – particularly as they relate to the question of apologetics. We have counselled against those methods which ultimately constitute a sell-out to the subjective assumptions of postmodernity on the one hand. But on the other, we have begun to explore the possible pitfalls

29 Quoted in B. Mitchell, *The Justification of Religious Belief*, Macmillan, London 1973, p 137.

inherent in a reaction against such an emphasis. For while Evangelicals will want to maintain the objective truthfulness of its faith-claims, an over-reaction against the subjectivism of postmodernity may lead us into the dangers of those styles of apologetic which attach a false Cartesian objectivity to our defence of the gospel. In preference, we have raised the issue of the *nature* of gospel apologetics and have suggested that an apologetic which takes the revelation of the gospel in the person of Jesus Christ as both its theological *and* methodological starting point will begin to obviate such pitfalls.

In the cultural transition between the Enlightenment ideal of truth as an objective and knowable 'commodity', and the postmodern rebuttal which protests that such truth is ultimately only a subjective variable, it is liberating, as always, to return to the NT. For here we find neither the false objectivity of a Descartes, nor the hopeless subjectivity of a Cupitt, but rather the offer of real and lasting truth through personal encounter with Jesus Christ. For in knowing him, we (and others also) are invited to discover that the hunger for both subjective fulfilment and objective certainty is completely and eternally satisfied. For 'this *is* eternal life', says Jesus 'that they may *know* you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent'.[30]

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30 John 17:3.