

# The End *of* Apologetics

Christian Witness in a Postmodern Context

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In memoriam  
The Reverend Joseph Walker

*Requiem aeternam dona ei, Domine, et lux perpetua luceat ei*



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# Introduction

## *Against Apologetics*

Is the cross, then, an argument?

Nietzsche

Alasdair MacIntyre begins his provocative book *After Virtue* with a “disquieting suggestion.” He asks us to imagine that a series of environmental disasters occur around the world and the general public places the blame for them squarely on scientists. Subsequently, natural science itself suffers the effects of this catastrophe. Riots break out across the globe, institutions of scientific research and teaching are destroyed, scientists are lynched and their books, equipment, and instruments destroyed, and all records of their existence expunged.<sup>1</sup> Eventually this reaction matures into a political movement that successfully abolishes the teaching of science from schools and universities. The remaining scientists are locked away so their views cannot infect society.

1. As Michael Buttrey pointed out to me, MacIntyre’s scenario bears an uncanny similarity to the basic plot of Walter Miller’s *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, first published in 1960. See Walter M. Miller Jr., *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (London: Harper Voyager, 2006).

Over time, however, a handful of “enlightened” people, who recall the marvels of science, react to this destructive movement. They seek to restore science to its former place, only they possess but a fragmentary knowledge of what it once was: bits and pieces of theories, chapters in books, partial articles, miscellaneous scientific instruments and equipment—all dissociated from the wider practices and theoretical underpinnings from which they arose and in which they originally made sense. Nonetheless, these fragments of science are redeployed within a new set of practices labeled according to the traditional branches of science: biology, chemistry, and physics. People continue to use scientific expressions—such as mass, neutrino, deoxyribonucleic acid, and stoichiometry—systematically and in interrelated ways, yet largely without relation to the manner in which those expressions were used in former times prior to the loss of scientific knowledge.

Accordingly, MacIntyre tells us, “Adults argue with each other about the respective merits of relativity, evolutionary theory, and phlogiston theory, although they possess only a very partial knowledge of each.” The children also are taught to engage in these of practices and “learn by heart the surviving portions of the periodic table and recite as incantations some of the theorems of Euclid.”<sup>2</sup> The problem is that no one, or almost no one, realizes that they are not practicing natural science properly at all. For, as MacIntyre notes, “everything they do and say conforms to certain canons of consistency and coherence and those contexts which would be needed to make sense of what they are doing have been lost, perhaps irretrievably.”<sup>3</sup>

MacIntyre presents this thought experiment in order to introduce his answer to the question of why contemporary discussions of morality are characterized by a fundamental and interminable lack of consensus. There seems to be no way of securing rational agreement regarding moral issues in Western culture.<sup>4</sup> So MacIntyre’s controversial thesis is that the moral language of our actual world is in the same state of disorder and chaos that exists in regard to natural

2. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 1.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, 6.

science in his imaginary world. What we possess, he believes, are only the *parts* and *pieces* of a coherent worldview and set of practices and *not* anything like a rational community with shared conceptual schemes, concepts, language, and practices that make sense of our perspectives and claims.<sup>5</sup>

According to MacIntyre, the great disaster that erased our knowledge of past moral discourse and put us in this state of grave disorder may be described more or less as the Enlightenment—or perhaps we could say the modern emphasis on universal, neutral (impersonal, ahistorical), and autonomous reason—which cuts off the modern self and its rational grounds for belief from a dependence on tradition or any other source outside the self.<sup>6</sup> There is an immense burden on modern thinkers to vindicate the old rules and practices of morality according to the rationality of free, autonomous, and sovereign moral agents—or else chalk them up to mere individual preference. This burden to justify moral rules in terms of the newly conceived Enlightenment rationality has almost completely failed, MacIntyre believes, and it was always doomed to fail because people no longer share a common understanding of the world or the self.

And it is precisely this feature of the calamity—its fundamental tie to the Enlightenment picture of the world—that renders it invisible to us today. We have no historical record or memory of this intellectual disaster because history to us means *academic* history, with its value-neutral standpoint, which is itself a product of the modern Enlightenment.<sup>7</sup> Once the assumptions of the Enlightenment are accepted, MacIntyre’s disaster is rendered virtually invisible, as the results of the Enlightenment cannot be but perceived as good and, even more, as inevitable and “natural.”<sup>8</sup> So the degree to which we

5. *Ibid.*, 2.

6. To oversimplify, in MacIntyre’s assessment, the Enlightenment project conceives of the moral agent as an utterly free self-governing being, sovereign in its moral authority, and yet continues to use the inherited language, rules, concepts, and discourse of morality that found their home in a fundamentally different picture of the self and the world—a world that was designed by God and governed through absolutely binding moral laws. Cf. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 63.

7. *Ibid.*, 4.

8. Cf. Charles Taylor: “Once we are well installed in the modern social imaginary, it seems the only possible one, the only one that makes sense. . . . Our embedding

accept the Enlightenment picture of the world and assume its values is also the degree to which we will be oblivious to the changes our culture has undergone in the Enlightenment.

### Another Disquieting Suggestion

This is a book about apologetics. Or, more precisely, it is a book *against* apologetics, for what I wish to propose is that what MacIntyre describes in *After Virtue* regarding moral inquiry is true also of Christian theology in general, and specifically Christian apologetics.<sup>9</sup> As MacIntyre tells the story, moral judgments undergo an (almost) imperceptible—but immensely significant—transformation in modernity. The ancient and medieval—that is, premodern—habit of making moral judgments as true or false persists in modernity, but their import and meaning are completely changed.<sup>10</sup> The result is that moral debates are deadlocked and interminable, and there seems to be no rational hope of resolving them in a single point of view. This subtle evolution in moral discourse occurs in modernity—or so MacIntyre contends—because, on the one hand, the traditional *language* of moral concepts (such as the normative use of the term “good”) and arguments carries on, while, on the other hand, the traditional conceptual structures and social practices that gave this language its meaning and sense have been lost.

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in modern categories makes it very easy for us to entertain a quite distorted view of the process [by which we became embedded in those modern categories].” *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 17.

9. I am not the first to make this suggestion, of course, and other theologians, such as Stanley Hauerwas at Duke University, have applied MacIntyre’s thought to theology. For a recent and effectual example, see Jonathan R. Wilson, *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World: From After Virtue to a New Monasticism* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010). I should also point out that whether MacIntyre is finally right or wrong in all the details of his account of our contemporary situation and how we got here—and even more in the specific prescriptions he offers to our situation—is beside my point. What I assume is that MacIntyre is fundamentally right about the dramatic shift to modernity from what preceded it, and that he is essentially correct in his assertion that this shift hinges on a new conception of human being and the nature and role of reason. MacIntyre’s story is not at all unique to him, and there is a strong contingent of scholars who agree in the basic movements he traces. For example, see Charles Taylor’s body of work, but especially Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007).

10. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 58–59.

This means our present situation is far more like that of Alice in *Alice in Wonderland* than it is like that of the crew of the starship Enterprise NCC-1701-D in the television show *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Unlike Alice, the crew of the Enterprise find themselves in a pluralistic world that is fairly well-defined by a “United Federation of Planets” that, despite differences, is banded together under a common constitution. Their world is also made relatively unambiguous by clear-cut boundaries between discrete species and races within the Federation itself, and by a clear mission<sup>11</sup> and a “Prime Directive”<sup>12</sup> that provide a rubric to make sense of their engagements with races and species outside the Federation. Alice, however, finds herself down the Rabbit Hole, alone in an underground world that in many respects resembles her life top-side, yet in a jumbled and chaotic way that is hard to anticipate. The different beings she encounters underground *appear* in some ways like those above ground and often *sound* the same, as they use the same vocabulary and engage in similar practices (e.g., Alice’s “trial” in the court of the Queen of Hearts). The differences are just enough, however, to make everything so confused and muddled that the world inside the Rabbit Hole is barely intelligible to Alice. And the same holds, by MacIntyre’s account, for our attempts to make moral sense of ourselves and our world as we seek to ground these in an independent rational framework.

The important point is MacIntyre’s insistence that the problem for Western modernity is not pluralism per se, but *fragmentation*.<sup>13</sup> By “pluralism” I mean the coexistence of various rival communities and traditions that are relatively intact and embody (to some extent) self-contained and coherent perspectives that can be distinguished from each other.<sup>14</sup> We assume, when we define our culture as pluralistic, that there exists an underlying and independent rational framework that grounds the contrasting mosaic of the discrete

11. According to Captain Jean-Luc Picard’s voice-over in the introduction to each episode, the Enterprise’s ongoing mission is “to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no one has gone before.”

12. The “Prime Directive” is a mandate not to interfere with the internal development of any civilization.

13. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2. Jonathan Wilson also emphasizes this in Wilson, *Living Faithfully*, 13–18.

14. Wilson, *Living Faithfully*, 16.

perspectives and positions around us. We then proceed to make sense of who we are, where we are, and how we are to act on that basis. The trouble is, in our current situation we possess only simulacra of coherent, rival traditions; the language(s) we use and the practices in which we engage are all jumbled together and missing important pieces—much like the inchoate discourses Alice encounters in her underground world. The various conceptual schemes that are available to us, and which we regularly employ, are fragmented to the degree that they lack precisely those contexts and practices that gave them their significance and meaning. Yet we continue, as Jonathan Wilson notes, to speak, act, and believe *as if* we live in a pluralistic culture made up of competing outlooks, communities, or positions that can be reasonably differentiated from each other.<sup>15</sup> We think we are on the starship Enterprise, but in reality we are down the Rabbit Hole with Alice. Thus, there is a critical blindness that accompanies our forgetfulness.

So too, I contend, for apologetics. By and large, apologetic arguments and natural theology are linguistic survivals from the practices of classical Christianity that have lost the context that made them meaningful and relevant. Subsequently, as with moral discourse, modern arguments around the existence of God, God's goodness, etc., are subject to interminable disagreement and a deep confusion that stem from their dislocation from a premodern worldview. The church has carried on its own version of the Enlightenment project in relation to its foundational discourse and has sought the same independent, rational justification for the gospel.<sup>16</sup> In the Enlightenment, the modern church inherits a vocabulary about God, the world, and the self from premodern Christianity in the same way modern Western culture inherited its moral language—and it faces the same pressures to justify its beliefs and practices using reasons that appeal to free, autonomous, and sovereign rational agents. This Christian apologetic version of the Enlightenment project suffers from the same substantial problems as does the wider Western cultural Enlightenment project.

15. *Ibid.*, 16.

16. *Cf. ibid.*, 29.

I should clarify that by “apologetics” I mean roughly the Enlightenment project of attempting to establish rational foundations for Christian belief.<sup>17</sup> I use this loose definition to cover a wide range of apologetic discourses that include both the project of defending the reasonableness of Christian orthodoxy and the broader theological project of articulating a rationally intelligible theology in “objective” and “neutral” terms that those outside the Christian community can accept. In short, I am referring to apologetic theology in both of its modern forms—conservative and liberal.

The hypothesis I wish to put forward is that the current apologetic debates—over the “rational foundations” of Christian theism or faith, reasons or evidences for faith in general, the sensational debates over “the New Atheism,” or evolution vs. creation—all share a similar fragmentary nature that produces the same interminable lack of consensus in moral discourse. They are also subject to a similar misfortune with respect to what we might call their conceptual grammar—that is, the language and ideas they employ.<sup>18</sup> When we use the language and arguments of ancient and medieval Christianity today, not only are the issues under contention significantly different, but the language and arguments themselves have actually been transformed from their original discourse. So it is that many attempts to articulate the reasonableness of Christian faith in our context paradoxically end up doing something different than defending genuine Christianity.

17. This way of defining apologetics will be important for what follows, as it does not refer to apologetics *simpliciter*, whose minimal concern is to defend Christian faith from specific charges of “falsehood, inconsistency, or credulity.” Steven B. Cowan, introduction to *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. Steven B. Cowan (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 8. I am not, in other words, against pointing out where a given challenge to Christian belief is flawed or highlighting how it is that Christianity makes good sense of the world. However, as should be clear in what follows, the discourse of modern apologetics inevitably engages in apologetics in the sense I reject, even (or especially) when it claims to be doing apologetics *simpliciter*.

18. Unlike MacIntyre, however, whose project is to make the reasons for the demise of moral discourse universally intelligible—“to radicals, liberals and conservatives alike” (MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 4)—by way of a thoroughly historicist recounting of our cultural situation, my project assumes all this as a working hypothesis and aims at redescription on this basis. That is to say, I am not going to perform a historicist re-working of the rise of modern apologetics in MacIntyre’s style. He wants to *argue* for his view of the world; I want to give a different account of it.

Despite its usefulness, I do not wish to overplay the analogy between MacIntyre's metaphor and the situation facing apologetics.<sup>19</sup> The chief feature I mean to highlight is that *speaking and thinking about God in our modern culture is fundamentally different from doing so prior to the Enlightenment*. And what is more, the modern Enlightenment worldview, while perhaps not quite arbitrary, is nevertheless just *one way* of seeing the world—including its views of reason, knowledge, and truth—and not the preordained result of inevitable progress or the unimpeachable acme of human achievement. Unless this point is explicitly acknowledged—if we *forget* this—we have a corresponding blind spot in our perspective that can have devastating results. We will have a theology (and Christian witness) fraught with deep conceptual confusions that fails, to that degree, to make Christian practices intelligible—or be *truly* Christian.

Undoubtedly, many of my readers believe apologetic discourse to be the very heart of Christian thought and the means by which Christianity is demonstrably true, intellectually satisfying, and worthy of belief, or has anything relevant to say to us today at all. What could be more obvious—to Christians, at least—than the value of apologetics? Is not defending Christian belief whenever it is challenged, refuting all contrary viewpoints, and establishing its rational foundations a crucial part of Christian witness and in fact a Christian duty? And, we might add, why should one not profit from this by generating an entire industry around this effort, commodifying it so that this “Good News” can reach as many people as possible?

John Stackhouse issues a timely admonition in his helpful book *Humble Apologetics*. Acknowledging Christians often lack a desirable humility regarding their convictions and realizing they are frequently prone to overestimate the rational warrant for their beliefs, Stackhouse warns that apologetics can be both blessing and curse.<sup>20</sup>

19. My approach in this book is fundamentally different than MacIntyre's attempt to recover what is procedurally a premodern form of rationality (cut off from its ontological and metaphysical moorings in a premodern cosmology) that is able in principle to be the final (albeit contingent) arbiter of belief. Instead, I wish to position human reason in a more explicitly after-modern way that lacks the exalted status MacIntyre gives his tradition-based concept of reason.

20. John G. Stackhouse Jr., *Humble Apologetics: Defending the Faith Today* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), xi.



Defending Christian belief is not an unqualified good; it may actually be counterproductive to faith. There are times and ways in which a given “defense” of the faith does more harm than good to the cause of Christ.

Stackhouse certainly points us in the right direction, but my unsettling proposition above forces us to radicalize his conclusion: not only *can* apologetics curse; it actually *is* a curse. Here I take my cue from Søren Kierkegaard, the nineteenth-century Danish philosopher and theologian, who stipulates that the one who came up with the idea of defending Christianity in modernity is a second Judas who *betrays* the Christ under the guise of a friendly kiss; only, he adds, the apologist’s treachery (unlike Judas’s) is “the treason of stupidity.”<sup>21</sup> Kierkegaard’s<sup>22</sup> claim about modern apologists makes sense, I believe, if we understand him to be proposing in apologetics something like the scenario MacIntyre describes regarding the contemporary language of morals and morality. According to Kierkegaard, contemporary apologists use Christian vocabulary in a confused and contradictory manner. They use language that performs the opposite of its intended function, and therefore actually betray Christianity rather than defend it.<sup>23</sup> When we place this critique of apologetics alongside MacIntyre’s

21. Søren Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 87. To be fair to Kierkegaard, and more accurate, I should acknowledge Kierkegaard’s pseudonym “Anti-Climacus” as the one who makes the above assertion, rather than Kierkegaard himself. For a variety of reasons, Kierkegaard uses pseudonyms to write several books and requests that we do them—and him—the honor of citing the pseudonyms, rather than Kierkegaard himself, whenever they are quoted. It is true, however, that Kierkegaard makes almost exactly the same claims about apologetics in the writings he signed, including his personal journals and papers. It is also important to note—for reasons that should become apparent in chap. 2—that the text quoted earlier actually says that the first one to come up with the idea of defending Christianity *in Christendom* is a “Judas No. 2.”

22. As I just noted, it is Anti-Climacus who is the “author” of the text in question. However, from now on I will use “Kierkegaard” as shorthand for the authors of all and any of the ideas contained in the texts published by “Søren Kierkegaard,” whether pseudonymous or not. This is done only for sake of clarity and convenience and not to ignore the significance of Kierkegaard’s pseudonymity or the challenges it poses for interpreting his texts.

23. Unlike Peter Rollins, whose position I often find opaque, I am not thinking here of betrayal as a virtue. See Peter Rollins, *The Fidelity of Betrayal: Towards a Church Beyond Belief* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2008).

thought experiment, it appears that something catastrophic occurred in the Enlightenment continues to affect not only our current beliefs, practices, and language concerning morals, but also our current beliefs, practices, and language concerning Christianity.

Something else happens when we place Kierkegaard's thought alongside MacIntyre's. We are given a new way of moving forward from modernity. In light of the failure of the modern project, MacIntyre's analysis brings us to a juncture where we are forced to *either* follow Nietzsche's nihilism, which embraces the failure of the Enlightenment project while retaining its fundamental shift away from premodern views of self, the world, and reason, *or* follow Aristotle's tradition-centered form of practical reason that is rooted in the narrative of a community and embodied in identifiable virtues and practices. I see Kierkegaard as offering us a middle way of sorts. He accepts something like a Nietzschean critique of modernity, yet he does so in terms of the Christian categories of revelation, incarnation, sin, conversion, repentance, faith, hope, and love.<sup>24</sup> The values of tradition, community, and so on remain open to modernity, but they are relative to God's revelation to us in Jesus Christ.

I have no doubt some might be tempted to dismiss my thesis out of hand simply because of my Kierkegaardian starting point. Kierkegaard's rejection of apologetics is not new news, after all. It is somewhat of a standard requirement in introductory apologetics courses to be able to fashion a response to Kierkegaard's alleged *fideism*—a view that sees faith and reason as fundamentally opposed to each other, and in matters of faith rejects reason altogether in a so-called leap of faith to embrace the absurd.<sup>25</sup> This is in fact MacIntyre's assessment of Kierkegaard as well, and it leads him to believe Kierkegaard has nothing substantial to offer us beyond yet another version

24. I develop this reading of Kierkegaard more in Myron B. Penner, "Kierkegaard's Critique of Secular Reason," in *The Persistence of the Sacred in Modern Thought*, ed. Chris L. Firestone and Nathan A. Jacobs (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), especially 379–86.

25. For an extremely influential rendering of this view of Kierkegaard, see Francis A. Schaeffer, *Escape from Reason* (London: Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1968), 46, 51.

of Nietzsche's nihilism.<sup>26</sup> However, my thought-experiment is built on the premise that Kierkegaard's point will be incomprehensible from the standpoint of modernity. This means the typical treatment of Kierkegaard as a fideist is not quite accurate—or at least it is not the way I wish to read Kierkegaard. The trouble I have with the fideist reading of Kierkegaard—in addition to being an inaccurate rendering of what the Kierkegaardian texts actually seem to say—is it continues to treat his thought under the categories of modern philosophy, which he so obviously labored to oppose. Kierkegaard's rejection of apologetics (and its use of reason) is to be seen as part and parcel of his rejection of the *modern* conception of reason—not of reason altogether. This signals a Kierkegaardian way forward that does not entail going back to Aristotle.

It might also seem to some readers that my working hypothesis is wildly fantastic and implausible, if for no other reason than I am claiming only a few Christians are even able to recognize their situation at all.<sup>27</sup> But this is no real objection at all, for, as MacIntyre notes, if our respective hypotheses are true at all, they will certainly appear false initially. That is exactly the situation we propose. So I persist with my suggestion that the language—more to the point, the theoretical presuppositions—we use to defend Christianity is crippled by a debilitating forgetfulness that remains blind to its basic assumptions and is out of line with its own deepest impulses, to the point it cannot speak to our contemporary situation and in the end betrays what it tries to protect.

This places Christian thought and language in a tight spot, though. What is the status of Christian thought if the apologetic foundations of Christian discourse are abandoned? Or, to ask the question differently, what does faithful witness to Jesus Christ look like in a

26. MacIntyre's label for Kierkegaard is "emotivist," as his subject matter is the relation of reason to morality, not to faith. See MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 39–45. I respond to MacIntyre in Penner, "Kierkegaard's Critique of Secular Reason." I deal with the place of reason in apologetics more in chap. 2.

27. Cf. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 4. I am in a better situation in this regard than MacIntyre, who published *After Virtue* in 1981. Since then there have been abundant critiques of modernity and its cognates, and there is a much higher level of recognition of their truth and the corresponding need for humility and charity in Christian belief.

postmodern context? I cannot expect to address these questions exhaustively and in all their complexity. However, I believe Kierkegaard's disavowal of apologetics is particularly relevant to Christians today. I want to explore the possibility Kierkegaard might be right; I want to take seriously his claim that apologetics *itself* might be the single biggest *threat* to genuine Christian faith that we face today. This book, therefore, tries to make sense of the idea that the modern apologetic enterprise so many Christians engage in is a bankrupt venture, a kind of false messiah, and considers what this might mean for Christian witness and discourse.

### Changing Paradigms

If my apologetic version of MacIntyre's "disquieting suggestion" is correct, and Kierkegaard is right to describe apologetic efforts as a betrayal of Christianity, Christians will need not merely to have a humbler apologetics, in which they say the same things, make the same arguments with the same basic goals—only in a nicer way. Instead, Christians need *an entirely new way of conceiving the apologetic task*. As I will argue in the next chapter, the only way to describe this is in terms of a major shift in Christian discourse from a modern apologetic paradigm to one that can be characterized as "postmodern." Christian thinkers rarely reflect on the validity of the apologetic enterprise itself, except to argue over aspects of apologetic methodology and postmodernism—*how* we defend Christianity against postmodernity, the status of faith in relation to reason, the role of evidence, and so on. However, the "value-neutral viewpoint"<sup>28</sup> adopted in modernity means my Kierkegaardian perspective on apologetics will remain invisible to it. If we are going to go forward with my hypothesis, then we will have to adopt another, more radical paradigm—one that recognizes and accounts for the blind spots of modernity. What we need, I contend, is a mode or form of discourse about apologetics that is "after modernity," not in the (deeply modern) sense of *overcoming* modernism, or moving *past* it, but one that *copest* with the entrenched problems it produces in both our practical

28. This is MacIntyre's terminology in *After Virtue*, 4.

and theoretical lives. It is in this sense I am advocating a shift to a postmodern paradigm.<sup>29</sup>

I should make a quick comment or two about how I use the term “postmodern.” First, I see postmodernity as a kind of self-reflexive condition that emerges as modernity becomes conscious or aware of itself as modernity. The kinds of shifts described by the terms “modern” and “postmodern” are descriptive of material conditions and are directly linked to changes in our social and discursive practices. It makes little sense to think of the postmodern ethos as characterized by a set of theses or adherence to philosophical doctrines and positions. Postmodernity is a *condition*, or a set of attitudes, dispositions, and practices, that is aware of itself as modern and aware that modernity’s claims to rational superiority are deeply problematic. So when I refer to Kierkegaard as “postmodern,” I mean it in the sense just described. At any rate, I appropriate Kierkegaard here as a Christian thinker who recognizes that modernity posits a new situation for Christian thought (and being) that must be reckoned with on its own terms. And then modernity must be gotten *past*—but not without going *through* it first. Modernity is, for better or worse, our situation, and we may never fully leave it behind us, however much we recognize its inadequacies.<sup>30</sup>

In this book, then, I aim to be Kierkegaardian, even while I do not attempt to write a book on Kierkegaard’s views on apologetics per se. Kierkegaard functions as a guiding light, so to speak, who charts the course and provides a good deal of the back story for my approach to apologetics here. You will find Kierkegaard shows up in many important places in the book—not as an authority who settles issues

29. Here it is interesting to note and helpful to reflect on Jean-François Lyotard’s comment that postmodernism is “undoubtedly part of the modern,” and that “a work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood,” Lyotard continues, “is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant.” *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 79.

30. I want to avoid the impression that mine is a nostalgic hankering for pre-modernity, which, as I see it, is problematic as well. The material conditions that gave rise to modernity testify to the inability of premodern views of the world to sustain themselves any longer.

and ends discussions, but more as a sage who offers us wisdom and shapes our deliberations. His awareness of the modern situation and his perceptive diagnosis of the spiritual malaise of modernity make Kierkegaard one of us—our contemporary—and confirm him as a distinctly *postmodern* thinker. Kierkegaard lives and writes at the height of the Enlightenment. He is steeped in the cultural and intellectual milieu of his day and finds himself caught up in the modern situation, with its problems and challenges—and he is fully aware of modernity as his general context. What qualifies his critique of apologetics as postmodern is it is part of his critique of modern thought as a whole. As a result, I put Kierkegaard to work to provide me with the basic framework from which I seek to address the issue of apologetics after modernity.

This book, then, is about the status of Christian belief in a post-modern context; it is about the meaning and significance of our Christian talk about God in postmodernity and the conditions in which we believe it and recommend it to others for belief. Rather than *arguing* for the superiority of postmodernism, I assume post-modernism as a starting point and try to make this standpoint intelligible through a technique similar to what Richard Rorty calls *redescription*.<sup>31</sup> Instead of tackling the modern apologetic paradigm head-on and refuting its foundational premises, I want to redescribe the terrain of apologetics so that our blind spots—or at least some of the more glaring ones—are made visible.<sup>32</sup> As Rorty might say, this is an intellectual practice that is necessary when one attempts to radically transform or replace a rigid but widely accepted vocabulary—particularly when one does not want to collapse back into the semantic categories of the contested vocabulary. So, in Rortian (and Kierkegaardian) fashion, my strategy is to try to make the modern apologetic paradigm look bad by using different metaphors than those it employs and, in a sense, by changing the subject in the hope

31. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 8–9.

32. Of course, I am keenly aware that every position—mine included—has its blind spots. Blind spots, however, are less of a problem if one's position expressly acknowledges their reality and builds this possibility into its analyses. A major problem with the modern paradigm, as I will explain, is its extreme difficulty in doing just that.

that I might outflank objections by painting a picture that resonates deeply with Christians.<sup>33</sup>

Part of my reason for starting this way is that even if it were possible to *prove* my position (or any other well-developed philosophical paradigm) to all comers (which I am quite sure is *not* possible), I have grave doubts over the value of the exercise. For one, it requires I adopt the language and viewpoint of modernity, which is just the thing I am trying to avoid. My goal is to reorient the discussion of Christian belief and change a well-entrenched vocabulary that simply does not work anymore, whatever its past uses might have been. But my motivation for this project is not (perhaps like Rorty's) merely to change the discussion to keep things "interesting" in a trivial sense. The deepest reason I have for engaging this project is in service of *the truth* and for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ. So my incentive comes from a deep conviction that the modern apologetic paradigm does not have the ability to witness *truthfully* to Christ in our post-modern situation. This means I will have much to say about truth later on in this book.

In the next chapter, "Apologetic Amnesia," I attempt to spell out a little more concretely what I mean by "the modern apologetic paradigm" and redescribe it so it stands in stark contrast to the type of postmodern perspective I will propose. The modern apologetic

33. Cf. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 44. This is also the task John Milbank sets for so-called Radical Orthodoxy in *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990). Milbank seeks to counter "secular modernity" by putting forward an alternative "*mythos*" or story that is equally unfounded but nevertheless embodies a vision of the world that is attractive (cf. 1, 279). One of the marked differences between Milbank's and my projects is his attempt to articulate a systematic account of a *theo-logos*—a fully developed theological account of human knowledge and secular modernity. Not only am I less ambitious than Milbank, I am also less optimistic regarding the possibility and value of such an account. For a helpful summary of Milbank and radical orthodoxy on this issue, see James K. A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-secular Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), especially 179–82. Smith also reports in *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, 180n110, that at a session of the American Academy of Religion in Atlanta, November 2003, Rorty himself asserted the basic similarity between his own redescriptive project and that of Milbank. For an important critical engagement with Milbank (and Radical Orthodoxy) from a Kierkegaardian perspective that is similar to mine, see Justin D. Klassen, *The Paradox of Hope: Theology and the Problem of Nihilism* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011).

paradigm, I submit, is embedded in what Charles Taylor calls our modern “condition of secularity.” Modern apologetics imagines itself in modern terms to be engaged in an objective, rational discourse outside of political power and other biases, so it may present the untarnished (and objective) truth about things. The goal is fundamentally epistemological—to provide rational warrant (or justification) for the beliefs of believers. The trouble with this is it includes a kind of blindness to the philosophical commitments that shape its perspective.

In chapter 2 (“Apologetics, Suspicion, and Faith”) I set out to outline a Kierkegaardian perspective<sup>34</sup> on apologetics—a reading of Kierkegaard’s thought that provides us with some resources for apologetic discourse in a postmodern paradigm. I begin by reading Kierkegaard’s critique of apologetics through his distinction between a genius and an apostle, and argue that this gives us a perspective from which to establish a Kierkegaardian critique of the modern epistemic paradigm. Several important points come to light in this reading, but one particularly important feature that emerges is its so-called hermeneutics of suspicion, which then becomes the vantage point from which a postmodern critique of apologetics is performed. In other words, Kierkegaard’s distinction between a genius and an apostle anticipates Marx’s critique of modern reason in terms of ideology; for what happens when the genius is the authority, Kierkegaard observes, is that justification or what counts as “reasonable” in a society is the opinion or perspective of the dominant group, the “established order.” This really is a roundabout way of describing what Nietzsche calls *nihilism*, because in this situation God effectively is dead: he can only enter into our rational systems on our terms. When apologetics implicitly functions within the genius model of modernity, it actually becomes another expression of this nihilism. So I suggest what we need is an entirely different model of apologetics than that of the modern epistemological paradigm. We need to shift from an epistemological focus on the rational justification of Christian beliefs to a hermeneutics concerned with explicating and understanding the life of faith.

34. I say “Kierkegaardian” because this perspective is inspired and informed by a close reading of Kierkegaard’s texts and not because I claim to present Kierkegaard’s personal views.



Chapter 3 (“Irony, Witness, and the Ethics of Belief”) links the possibility of a postmodern apologetics to the concept of irony. Rather than framing the issue in terms of an apologetic defense of Christian belief, I prefer to consider a postmodern apologetics in terms of the concept of *witness*—a *prophetic* witness, to be clear—for it orients us to the task differently and generates a completely different set of goals. Here edification—or building up the self—replaces “winning the argument” as the goal of Christian witness (apologetic discourse). This type of postmodern Christian witness is sensitive to the fragility of faith in our secular condition. It is not focused on a defense of the propositional truth of Christian doctrine, but performs an ironic poetics of truth. What we discover is that the shift away from the (modern) epistemology of belief as the paradigm for Christian witness toward a hermeneutics of belief also opens up an *ethics* of belief that, in turn, deepens the critique of modern epistemology. *How* we believe—not just *what* we believe—is important to our belief being justified.

But what of this notion of a “poetics of truth”? What sense can we give that? And how in postmodernity can there be any substantial talk of truth once we have adopted a hermeneutical perspective?

In chapter 4 (“Witness and Truth”) I further clarify the approach to truth involved in my Kierkegaardian account of Christian witness and relate it to propositional truth. I begin by noting that the goal of traditional apologetics is to justify the objective truth of the propositions of Christian doctrine. Christianity, the “essentially Christian,” is therefore assumed, implicitly or explicitly, to be captured in these propositions. The Christian truths defended by such modern apologetics are taken to be ahistorical, unsituated, abstract, and universal. I then use Kierkegaard’s concept of truth as subjectivity to launch a critique on apologetic propositionalism and to provide an alternative way to think about Christian truth. To possess Christian truth is always to *confess* it to be true, to *win* its truth existentially for oneself. This is not a disavowal of the cognitive content of Christian witness; it is a shifting of our perspective about a given truth claim so we think of it in terms of what Paul Ricoeur calls “attestation.” As I develop it, this account of truth and truth-telling is *agonistic*—it involves a struggle to stake our truth claims and make them true of us. Christian truth, then, often involves suffering on the part of the witness, and

martyrdom—the act of laying down one’s life—is the ultimate form of testimony to the truths that edify us.

In chapter 5 (“The Politics of Witness”) I connect the ethics of belief (chapter 3) with an ethics of witness, which gives us the resources to attest to Christian truths in a way that is sensitive to a person’s particular cultural and social location and does not perpetrate injustice in the name of Christian truth. Here I expose the possibilities of violence in Christian apologetic discourse at both the personal level (when apologetic arguments are used to treat their interlocutors as the “faceless unbeliever”) and the social level (when Christian apologetic practice merely reinforces and defends a given set of power relations operative within an unjust social structure). In this latter situation, Christian apologetics ends up reinforcing the dominant ideology in a society and the gospel loses its ability to confront the culture in a prophetic sense. In contrast to this, the postmodern prophetic witness that I advocate is “person-preserving” and involves Gabriel Marcel’s concept of sympathy, which propounds a fundamental concern with others as *persons*, not things. This is a noncoercive form of witness that is itself a form of ideology critique, of both the culture within which it is embedded and the Christian subculture out of which it emerges.

This form of witness is *political* in two ways. First, it is political in the deep sense that Christian witness never occurs in a so-called public square free from political power. The prophetic witness understands St. Paul’s concept of “the powers” that actively shape and influence us as individuals. The witness, then, brings private commitments into the imagined “public” space and places into question the institutional and political powers that form our identities and relationships. Second, prophetic Christian witness is political in that it requires a church—a community of people who embody the truths professed by Christians through their practices. This is what makes it possible for people to understand and believe the Christian gospel.

The person-preserving aspect of Christian witness comes from its specific form as *agapē*, an aspect of loving one’s neighbor. In chapter 5 I introduce the Kierkegaardian notion that the Christian concept of neighbor entails that my neighbor is the one for whom I am infinitely responsible, to whom I have an infinite debt, and whose subjectivity I cannot violently erase. This is an even more radical concept of

indebtedness to the other than we have from Emmanuel Levinas and his emphasis on “the face” of the other. In the victory of love, Kierkegaard notes, one is forever fighting on the side of the neighbor against oneself and one’s own tendencies to dehumanize and objectify others. This opens up for us an option not considered by Alasdair MacIntyre, who thinks of reason as tradition-based. The temptation for Christians is to think that because there are intelligible reasons for faith within the Christian tradition, this can be a substitute for our reliance on God and our need to hear from him. Instead, I want to say the way reason relates to prophetic witness is *apocalyptic*, in the sense that such a witness emphasizes the dependence of reason on God’s action, which disrupts and subverts our attempts to ground it rationally. Prophetic witness, then, always calls its tradition back to its founding event or truth that undoes and reorients everything—including us.

I am writing this book from the vantage point of a member of the Christian community—the church—and I write it for my own edification as well as that of the church catholic. This is therapy as well as theory. I trust it will be obvious that, while I am engaging in a polemic against a certain form of Christian apologetic discourse, my ultimate goal is to open a pathway for faithful witness, not to close down its possibility. As Jacques Derrida noted that his deconstructive project was a labor of love,<sup>35</sup> so too this book is written to build up, not (just) tear down. My hope is the exhortative function of this book will speak also to those who profess no faith—a word of woe to (some of) those within the church, and a word of witness to those outside it.

35. Derrida declares, “I love very much everything that I deconstruct in my own manner; the texts I want to read from a deconstructive point of view are texts that I love.” Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, ed. Christie McDonald, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 87.