

Advice to European Christian Apologists

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SUMMARY

Tips to budding European Christian apologists.

ADVICE TO EUROPEAN CHRISTIAN APOLOGISTS

In 1983, when Alvin Plantinga delivered his inaugural lecture as the John O'Brien Professor of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame, he chose as his topic 'Advice to Christian Philosophers.' Today I have chosen as my subject the related, but somewhat narrower, topic 'Advice to Christian Apologists,' more specifically *European* Christian Apologists.

Now some of you may be thinking, 'Who are you, an American, to be giving us advice?' Plantinga faced a similar question and provided the best means of handling it. He replied, 'That's a good question. I shall deal with it as one properly deals with good questions to which one doesn't know the answer: I shall ignore it.' So, too, shall I. I want only to assure you that the advice I shall give, though pointed, springs out of a deep burden for Europe and that I stand united with you in our common task.

It is part of the purpose of this conference to awaken a movement of Christian apologetics in Europe with a view toward reclaiming lost intellectual territory for Christ, to remold European intellectual life in such a way as to make the Christian *Weltanschauung* a viable intellectual alternative for educated European men and women today. The task is daunting, indeed, overwhelming; some might even say hopeless. But given that we serve a God for whom nothing is impossible (Matt. 19.26) and that this is the vision which inspires us and that such is the task which is laid upon us, how shall we best go about it?

Before we can answer that question, we need to have some grasp of the challenge confronting us. In general European culture is deeply post-Christian. It is the product of the Enlightenment, which introduced into European culture the leaven of secularism that has by now permeated the whole. The hallmark of the Enlightenment was 'free thought,' that is, the pursuit of knowledge by means of unfettered human reason alone. While it is by no means inevitable that such a pursuit must lead to non-Christian conclusions, and while most of the original Enlightenment thinkers were themselves theists, it has been the overwhelming impact of the Enlightenment mentality that European intellectuals do not consider theological knowledge to be possible. Theology is not a source of genuine knowledge and therefore is not a *Wissenschaft*, or a science. Reason and religion are at odds with each other. The picture of the world which emerges from the genuine sciences is a thoroughly naturalistic picture. The person who follows the pursuit of reason unflinchingly toward its end will be atheistic or, at best, agnostic.

In Eastern Europe Enlightenment secularism was reinforced by the Marxist critique of religion.

Although Eastern Europeans remained skeptical of Marxism's positive account of man and society (it's hard to believe in the virtues of the dictatorship of the proletariat when you have to wait 17 years to buy a miserable Trabant), still they largely accepted the Marxist negative critique of religious belief, which was drilled into generations of schoolchildren by state indoctrinators. Those who refused to accept it were simply denied higher education, which had the effect of imprisoning Christians in the uneducated, lower class.

There have been counter-currents to Enlightenment rationalism in European thought—one thinks of Romanticism, for example--, but these have been no more sympathetic to Christianity than the Enlightenment project. Indeed, they have sometimes served to offer a mystical, pantheistic, nature religion as an alternative to traditional theism, in order that one's religious yearnings, which Enlightenment rationalism tended to treat dismissively, might not go unfulfilled.

On the current scene, self-proclaimed 'Post-Modernism' is such a movement. The Enlightenment is associated with the modern age, dominated by science and technology, and hence is sometimes called 'Modernity.' Post-Modernism rejects the all-sufficiency of human reason championed by free thought. This might seem at first blush a welcome development for Christian believers, weary of centuries of attacks by Enlightenment rationalists. But in this case the cure is worse than the disease. For Post-Modernists deny that there are universal standards of logic, rationality, and truth. This claim is incompatible with the Christian idea of God, who, as the Creator and Sustainer of all things, is an objectively existing reality, and who, as an omniscient being, has a privileged perspective on the world, grasping the world as it is in the unity of his intellect. There is thus a unity and objectivity to truth which is incompatible with Post-Modernism.

Post-Modernists thus often see their task as implicitly anti-theological. For example, the literary critic Roland Barthes has written,

To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final significance, to close the writing In precisely this way literature, by refusing to assign . . . an ultimate meaning to the text (and to the world as text) liberates what may be called an antitheological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases--reason, science, law.

Thus, Post-Modernism is no more friendly to Christian truth claims than is Enlightenment rationalism. Christianity is reduced to but one voice in a cacophony of competing claims, none of which is objectively true.

In any case, Enlightenment rationalism is so deeply imbedded in European intellectual life that these anti-rationalistic currents like Romanticism and Post-Modernism are doomed, I think, to be mere passing fashions. And, after all, no one adopts a Post-Modernist view of literary texts when reading texts such as the labels on a medicine bottle or a box of rat poison! Clearly, we ignore the objective meaning of such texts only at peril to our lives. In the end, people turn out to be

subjectivists only about ethics and religion, not about matters provable by science. But this isn't Post-Modernism; this is nothing else than classic Enlightenment rationalism—it is the old Modernism in a fashionable new guise.

Thus, the secularism originating in the Enlightenment shapes European life, and especially European academia. Although the overwhelming majority of Europeans retain a nominal affiliation with Christianity, only about 10% are practicing believers, and less than half of those are evangelical in theology. The most significant trend in European religious affiliation is the growth of those classed as 'non-religious' from effectively 0% of the population in 1900 to over 22% today. Doubtless, the percentage of non-religious persons would be even higher among those in academic life.

I mention academic life because the single most important institution shaping Western culture is the university. It is at the university that our future political leaders, our journalists, our lawyers, our teachers, our business executives, our artists, will be trained. It is at the university that they will formulate or, more likely, simply absorb the worldview that will shape their lives. And since these are the opinion-makers and leaders who shape our culture, the worldview that they imbibe at the university will be the one that shapes our culture. If we change the university, we change our culture through those who shape culture. If the Christian worldview can be restored to a place of prominence and respect at the university, it will have a leavening effect throughout society.

Why is this important? Simply because the Gospel is never heard in isolation. It is always heard against the background of the cultural milieu in which one lives. A person raised in a cultural milieu in which Christianity is still seen as an intellectually viable option will display an openness to the Gospel which a person who is secularized will not. For the secular person you may as well tell him to believe in fairies or leprechauns as in Jesus Christ! Or, to give a more realistic illustration, it is like a devotee of the Hare Krishna movement approaching you on the street and inviting you to believe in Krishna. Such an invitation strikes us as bizarre, freakish, even amusing. But to a person on the streets of Bombay, such an invitation would, I assume, appear quite reasonable and cause for reflection. I fear that evangelicals appear almost as weird to persons on the streets of Bonn, Stockholm, or Paris as do the devotees of Krishna.

It is for that reason that Christians who depreciate the value of apologetics because 'no one comes to Christ through intellectual arguments' are so short-sighted. For the value of apologetics extends far beyond one's immediate evangelistic contact. It is the broader task of Christian apologetics to help create and sustain a cultural milieu in which the Gospel can be heard as an intellectually viable option for thinking men and women. The great Princeton theologian J. Gresham Machen rightly declared,

False ideas are the greatest obstacles to the reception of the gospel. We may preach with all the fervor of a reformer and yet succeed only in winning a straggler here and there, if we permit the whole collective thought of the nation to be controlled by ideas which prevent Christianity from

being regarded as anything more than a harmless delusion. Under such circumstances, what God desires us to do is to destroy the obstacle at its root.

The root of the obstacle is to be found in the university, and it is there that it must be attacked. But that implies that popular-level apologetics aimed at the masses will not do the job. Only scholarly level apologetics aimed at specialists in the various academic disciplines will be capable of changing the university and so ensuring lasting cultural change. Machen observed that many people 'would have the seminaries combat error as it is taught by its popular exponents' instead of confusing students 'with a lot of German names unknown outside the walls of the university.' But, Machen insisted, the scholarly method of procedure

. . . is based simply upon a profound belief in the pervasiveness of ideas. What is to-day matter of academic speculation begins to-morrow to move armies and pull down empires. In that second stage, it has gone too far to be combated; the time to stop it was when it was still a matter of impassionate debate. So as Christians we should try to mould the thought of the world in such a way as to make the acceptance of Christianity something more than a logical absurdity.

Thus, paradoxically, the most effective books in apologetics will not be books on apologetics at all. Rather they will be books like Alvin Plantinga's *The Nature of Necessity*, Thomas Morris's *The Logic of God Incarnate*, and Colin Hemer's *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*.

So what, we may ask, are European evangelicals doing to win this scholarly debate and so change the university? Well, frankly, the answer must be: very little, indeed. With the notable exception of Great Britain and to a lesser extent Germany, Europe has produced few, distinguished evangelical scholars. What evangelical scholars there are tend to be big fish in a very small pond. Their influence extends very little beyond the evangelical subculture. They teach for the most part at evangelical Bible schools and seminaries instead of the universities; they tend to publish with evangelical presses, so that their works remain largely unread by non-evangelical scholars; and instead of participating in the standard professional societies, they shun these in favor of evangelical conferences. As a result, their light is put under a bushel, they have little leavening effect for the sake of the Gospel in their professional fields, and the deadening effect of secularism on the culture at large goes unchecked.

We desperately need in Europe evangelical scholars who can compete with secular scholars on their own terms of scholarship. Charles Malik, the former Lebanese ambassador to the United States, in his address at the inauguration of the Billy Graham center at Wheaton College, warned American Christians of the danger of anti-intellectualism. He asked pointedly, Who among evangelicals can stand up to the great secular scholars on their own terms of scholarship? Who among evangelical scholars is quoted as a normative source by the greatest secular authorities on history or philosophy or psychology or sociology or politics? Does the evangelical mode of thinking have the slightest chance of becoming the dominant mode in the great universities of Europe and America that stamp our entire civilization with their spirit and

ideas?

Malik went on to say,

It will take a different spirit altogether to overcome this great danger of anti-intellectualism. For example, I say this different spirit, so far as philosophy alone--the most important domain for thought and intellect--is concerned, must see the tremendous value of spending an entire year doing nothing but poring intensely over the *Republic* or the *Sophist* of Plato, or two years over the *Metaphysics* or the *Ethics* of Aristotle, or three years over the *City of God* of Augustine. But if a start is made now on a crash program in this and other domains, it will take at least a century to catch up with the Harvards and Tübingens and the Sorbonnes—and by then where will *these* universities be? For the sake of greater effectiveness in witnessing to Jesus Christ, as well as for their own sakes, evangelicals cannot afford to keep on living on the periphery of responsible intellectual existence.

These words hit like a hammer. European evangelicals, like their American brethren, have for the most part been living on the periphery of responsible intellectual existence. If the university and, as a consequence, European culture is to be changed, then European evangelicals need to re-engage intellectually.

It can be done! For example, over the last 40 years there has been an on-going revolution in the Anglo-American world in the field of philosophy. Since the late 1960's Christian philosophers have been coming out of the closet and defending the truth of the Christian world view with philosophically sophisticated arguments in the finest secular journals and societies. And the face of Anglo-American philosophy has been transformed as a result. Fifty years ago philosophers widely regarded talk about God as literally *meaningless*, as mere gibberish, but today no informed philosopher could take such a viewpoint. In fact, many of America's finest philosophers today are outspoken Christians.

To give you some feel for the impact of this revolution, I want to quote at some length from an article which appeared last fall in the journal *Philo* lamenting what the author called 'the desecularization of academia that evolved in philosophy departments since the late 1960s.' The author, himself a prominent atheist philosopher, writes,

By the second half of the twentieth century, universities . . . had been become in the main secularized. The standard . . . position in each field . . . assumed or involved arguments for a naturalist world-view; departments of theology or religion aimed to understand the meaning and origins of religious writings, not to develop arguments against naturalism. Analytic philosophers . . . treated theism as an anti-realist or non-cognitivist world-view, requiring the reality, not of a deity, but merely of emotive expressions or certain 'forms of life'. . . .

This is not to say that none of the scholars in the various academic fields were [*sic*] realist theists in

their 'private lives'; but realist theists, for the most part, excluded their theism from their publications and teaching, in large part because theism . . . was mainly considered to have such a low epistemic status that it did not meet the standards of an 'academically respectable' position to hold. The secularization of mainstream academia began to quickly unravel upon the publication of Plantinga's influential book, *God and Other Minds*, in 1967. It became apparent to the philosophical profession that this book displayed that realist theists were not outmatched by naturalists in terms of the most valued standards of analytic philosophy: conceptual precision, rigor of argumentation, technical erudition, and an in-depth defense of an original world-view. This book, followed seven years later by Plantinga's even more impressive book, *The Nature of Necessity*, made it manifest that a realist theist was writing at the highest qualitative level of analytic philosophy, on the same playing field as Carnap, Russell, Moore, Grünbaum, and other naturalists. . . .

Naturalists passively watched as realist versions of theism, most influenced by Plantinga's writings, began to sweep through the philosophical community, until today perhaps one-quarter or one-third of philosophy professors are theists, with most being orthodox Christians. Although many theists do not work in the area of the philosophy of religion, so many of them do work in this area that there are now over five philosophy journals devoted to theism or the philosophy of religion, such as *Faith and Philosophy*, *Religious Studies*, *International Journal of the Philosophy of Religion*, *Sophia*, *Philosophia Christi*, etc. *Philosophia Christi* began in the late 1990s and already is overflowing with submissions from leading philosophers.

. . . theists in other fields tend to compartmentalize their theistic beliefs from their scholarly work; they rarely assume and never argue for theism in their scholarly work. If they did, they would be committing academic suicide or, more exactly, their articles would quickly be rejected. . . . But in philosophy, it became, almost overnight, 'academically respectable' to argue for theism, making philosophy a favored field of entry for the most intelligent and talented theists entering academia today. A count would show that in Oxford University Press' 2000–2001 catalogue, there are 96 recently published books on the philosophy of religion By contrast, there are 28 books . . . on the philosophy of language, 23 on epistemology (including religious epistemology, such as Plantinga's *Warranted Christian Belief*), 14 on metaphysics, [etc]. . . .

God is not 'dead' in academia; he returned to life in the late 1960s and is now alive and well in his last academic stronghold, philosophy departments.

This is the testimony of a prominent atheist philosopher to the change that has taken place before his eyes in Anglo-American philosophy. I think that he is probably exaggerating when he estimates that one-quarter to one-third of American philosophers are theists, but what his estimates do reveal is the perceived impact of Christian philosophers upon this field. Like Gideon's army, a committed minority of activists can have an impact far out of proportion to their numbers. The principal error that Smith makes is calling philosophy departments God's 'last bastion' at the university. On the contrary, philosophy departments are a beachhead, from which operations can be launched to impact other disciplines at the university for Christ. Indeed, I think we are already seeing the spillover effect in areas like the natural

sciences, where a flourishing dialogue between science and religion is going on, and proponents of so-called 'Intelligent Design' are making waves.

The point is that the task of desecularization is not hopeless or impossible, nor need significant changes take as long to achieve as one might think. It is this sort of Christian scholarship which represents the best hope for the transformation of culture that Malik and Machen envisioned, and its true impact for the cause of Christ will only be felt in the next generation, as it filters down into popular culture.

I have said all this concerning the challenge that confronts us. What advice, then, might I give to those whom God has burdened with the awesome task of becoming Christian apologists in Europe? Let me be very practical.

1. You must master the English language. For better or worse, the simple fact is that most of the apologetically significant literature today is in English. Moreover, some of this literature is highly technical and difficult to read even for a native speaker. The writings of Alvin Plantinga are an especially significant resource. If your English is weak, then vast amounts of important work will be closed to you.

Probably the best thing you can do to improve your English is to spend several months studying in an Anglophone country. For Europeans Great Britain is the obvious choice. Look into opportunities to study, perhaps during a summer, at a British university or college.

2. You need to take a strong dose of analytic philosophy. The kind of philosophy that predominates in the Anglophone world is known as analytic philosophy. This style of philosophizing contrasts sharply with that of Continental philosophy. Whereas Continental philosophy tends to be obscure, imprecise, and emotive, analytic philosophy lays great worth and emphasis on clarity of definitions, careful delineation of premisses, and logical rigor of argumentation. Unfortunately, theology has tended to follow the lead of Continental philosophy, which only results in darkness being piled upon darkness. The experience of the last 40 years of the renaissance of Anglo-American Philosophy of Religion has revealed that important apologetical issues can be brilliantly illuminated through the light of philosophical analysis. Richard Swinburne, the Nolloth Professor of the Philosophy of the Christian Religion at Oxford University has written,

It is one of the intellectual tragedies of our age that when philosophy in English-speaking countries has developed high standards of argument and clear thinking, the style of theological writing has been largely influenced by the continental philosophy of Existentialism, which, despite its considerable other merits, has been distinguished by a very loose and sloppy style of argument. If argument has a place in theology, large-scale theology needs clear and rigorous argument. That point was very well grasped by Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus, by Berkeley, Butler, and Paley. It is high time for theology to return to their standards.

By employing the high standards of reasoning characteristic of analytic philosophy we can powerfully formulate apologetic arguments for both commending and defending the Christian worldview. In recent

decades, analytic philosophers of religion have shed new light on the rationality and warrant of religious belief, on arguments for the existence of God, on divine attributes such as necessity, eternity, omnipotence, omniscience, and goodness, on the problem of suffering and evil, on the nature of the soul and immortality, on the problem of miracles, and even on peculiarly Christian doctrines like the Trinity, incarnation, atonement, original sin, revelation, hell, and prayer. I simply cannot describe to you the wealth of material out there which has been produced by analytic philosophers of religion.

If you want to do apologetics effectively, you need to be trained in analytic philosophy. And I say this even if your area of specialization is not philosophical apologetics. Suppose you choose to specialize in scientific or historical apologetics. The fact is that some of the most important issues you will confront will be questions arising from philosophy of science or epistemology. Over and over again I see scientists and New Testament scholars making faulty inferences or proceeding from unexamined presuppositions because of their philosophical naiveté. Whatever your area of specialization, you will be better equipped as an apologist if you have had training in analytic philosophy.

*You can begin by taking a course or working through a textbook on first-order logic. Then work through a textbook on modal logic, the logic of possibility and necessity. There are also good Introductions to analytic philosophy which you can consult. Finally, begin to read analytic philosophy of religion. A good beginning text applying the insights of analytic philosophy to apologetics is *Reason for the Hope Within*, edited by Michael Murray (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999). A good reference tool is Philip Quinn and Charles Taliaferro's *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion* (Blackwell, 1997); you might also consult the articles in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* published by Routledge. There is an abundance of fine anthologies in philosophy of religion, for example, the reader and guide I recently edited for Edinburgh University Press entitled *Philosophy of Religion* (2002).*

3. Earn a doctorate in your area of specialization. This may not come as welcome advice. But popular apologetics alone will not do the job. Popular apologetics may sway the uneducated, but it will not change the prevailing thought structures of society. In order to transform the culture, we must change the university. In order to change the university, we must do scholarly apologetics. In order to do scholarly apologetics, we must earn doctorates. It's that simple.

It will not be easy. The power structures at European universities are often deeply anti-Christian. Students who are evangelical Christians will be weeded out by denying them degrees or professorships. There will be, and already have been, victims of anti-Christian discrimination in the process. Such fallen brethren are truly intellectual martyrs for the cause of Christ, and my heart breaks for them. But over time, more and more of us will successfully get through. In the United States, graduate programs in philosophy are awash with Christian students gradually working their way up through the system. As the old guard dies off and young Christian philosophers are hired in their places, the face of the university will change. What Thomas Kuhn said of scientific revolutions is also true of Christian revolutions: they proceed one funeral at a time. It can happen in Europe, too. Be patient. Be persistent. Be prayerful. Change will come.

Now I realize that for some of you, the opportunity for doctoral study has passed you by. In your case, I'd encourage you to be on the lookout for younger students whom you can direct into doctoral programs. But if you're under 35, that opportunity is still a realistic option which I'd encourage you to explore. The keys for success will be, first, choosing a doctoral thesis topic which you're passionate about, and, second, finding a mentor at a secular university who is at least sympathetic with your thesis topic. You may have to write on a more neutral topic than you'd like in order not to arouse opposition to your candidacy. For example, my doctoral thesis on the resurrection of Jesus was primarily a history of historical apologetics for the resurrection. Once I had the degree safely in hand, I published the hundreds of pages I had written on my own historical apologetic for the resurrection as a second volume.

I hope that many of you will seriously consider going on for doctoral work in some specialized field as an integral part of your apologetic calling.

4. Be mindful of your personal, spiritual formation. I'm not always enthusiastic when I meet a student who tells me that we wants to become a Christian apologist. One sometimes detects that what the student really wants is the limelight and the glory. Or there may be a spirit of argumentativeness or arrogance about him. Or perhaps a craving for the affirmation of others to offset a personal sense of inferiority. Of course, we are all broken people, and none of us has motives that are wholly pure. But it is vitally important that, as a public representative of Christ, the Christian apologist be a person who goes often to his knees to spend time with God, who depends daily on the filling of the Holy Spirit to live a life pleasing and acceptable to God. He must seek Christ's glory, not his own. He must be open to criticism and willing to see his own shortcomings. If he is married, he must not place his ministry or studies ahead of his family, but rather be prepared to give up his studies and ministry if necessary for the sake of those he loves. He must guard against sin, especially sexual sin, in thought as well as deed so as not to dishonor Christ. He must learn what it means, not to merely do things for God, but to be the person God wants him to be.

Unless we learn to be who God wants us to be, all our achievements will be as wood, hay, and stubble. Our spiritual formation is therefore as vitally important as our academic formation as Christian apologists.

*To review, my advice to you as European Christian apologists is (1) Master the English language; (2) Take a strong dose of analytic philosophy; (3) Earn a doctorate in your area of specialization; and (4) Be mindful of your personal, spiritual formation. I would also encourage you to become part of a community of like-minded scholars. For the last three years I've served as the President of the Evangelical Philosophical Society, a recently revitalized society of evangelical philosophers. Our membership now numbers over 1,100. Our journal *Philosophia Christi* is the only evangelical journal of philosophy in the world and is emerging as one of the leading journals in philosophy of religion. It is a tremendous resource for those involved in Christian apologetics. We are eager to establish chapters in various European countries and would invite you to become a part.*

I believe that Europe can be changed. I'm excited about the stirrings of a new movement I've seen in Europe, of which this conference is but one indication. May God raise up a mighty force of committed men and women to transform the European university and, hence, European culture in such a way that the Gospel may be heard afresh in all its life-changing power.

Quentin Smith, 'The Metaphilosophy of Naturalism' Philo 4/2(2001)