

Christian Apologetics

by C. S. Lewis (1945)

Some of you are priests and some are leaders of youth organizations. I have little right to address either. It is for priests to teach me, not for me to teach them. I have never helped to organize youth, and while young myself I successfully avoided being organized. If I address you it is in response to a request so urged that I came to regard compliance as a matter of obedience.

I am to talk about apologetics. Apologetics means of course defense. The first question is -- What do you propose to defend? Christianity, of course: and Christianity as understood by the church in Wales. And here at the outset I must deal with an unpleasant business. It seems to the layman that in the Church of England we often hear from our priests doctrine which is not Anglican Christianity. It may depart from Anglican Christianity in either of two ways: (1) It may be so "broad" or "liberal" or "modern" that it in fact excludes any real supernaturalism and thus ceases to be Christian at all. (2) It may, on the other hand, be Roman. It is not, of course, for me to define to you what Anglican Christianity is--I am your pupil, not your teacher. But I insist that wherever you draw the lines, bounding lines must exist, beyond which your doctrine will cease to be Anglican or to be Christian: and I suggest also that the lines come a great deal sooner than many modern priests think. I think it is your duty to fix the lines clearly in your own minds: and if you wish to go beyond them you must change your profession.

This is your duty not specifically as Christians or as priests but as honest men. There is a danger here of the clergy developing a special professional conscience which obscures the very plain moral issue. Men who have passed beyond these boundary lines in either direction are apt to protest that they have come by their unorthodox opinions honestly. In defense of these opinions they are prepared to suffer obloquy and to forfeit professional advancement. They thus come to feel like martyrs. But this simply misses the point which so gravely scandalizes the layman. We never doubted that the unorthodox opinions were honestly held: what we complain of is your continuing your ministry after you have come to hold them. We always knew that a man who makes his living as a paid agent of the Conservative party may honestly change his views and honestly become a Communist.

What we deny is that he can honestly continue to be a Conservative agent and to receive money from one party while he supports the policy of another.

Even when we have thus ruled out teaching which is in direct contradiction to our profession, we must define our task still further. We are to defend Christianity itself--the faith preached by the Apostles, attested by the Martyrs, embodied in the Creeds, expounded by the Fathers. This must be clearly distinguished from the whole of what any one of us may think about God and man. Each of us has his individual emphasis: each holds, in addition to the faith, many opinions which seem to him to be consistent with it and true and important. And so perhaps they are. But as apologists it is not our business to defend them. We are defending Christianity; not "my religion."

When we mention our personal opinions we must always make quite clear the difference between them and the faith itself. St. Paul has given us the model in I Corinthians vii. 25: on a certain point he has "no commandment of the Lord" but gives "his judgment." No one is left in doubt as to the difference in status implied.

This distinction, which is demanded by honesty, also gives the apologist a great tactical advantage. The great difficulty is to get modern audiences to realize that you are preaching Christianity solely and simply because you happen to think it true; they always suppose you are preaching it because you like it or think it good for society or something of that sort. Now a clearly maintained distinction between what the faith actually says and what you would like it to have said or what you understand or what you personally find helpful or think probable, forces your audience to realize that you are tied to your data just as the scientist is tied by the results of the experiments; that you are not just saying what you like. This immediately helps them to realize that what is being discussed is a question about objective fact--not gas about ideals and points of view.

Secondly, this scrupulous care to preserve the Christian message as something distinct from one's own ideas, has one very good effect upon the apologist himself. It forces him, again and again, to face up to those elements in original Christianity which he personally finds obscure or repulsive. He is saved from the temptation to skip or slur or ignore what he finds disagreeable. And the man who yields to that temptation will, of course, never progress in Christian knowledge. For obviously the doctrines which one finds easy are the doctrines which give Christian sanction to truths you already knew. The new truth which

you do not know and which you need most, in the very nature of things, be hidden precisely in the doctrine you least like and least understand. It is just the same here as in science. The phenomenon which is troublesome, which doesn't fit in with the current scientific theories, is the phenomenon which compels reconsideration and thus leads to new knowledge. Science progresses because scientists, instead of running away from such troublesome phenomena or hushing them up, are constantly seeking them out. In the same way, there will be progress in Christian knowledge only as long as we accept the challenge of the difficult or repellent doctrines. A "liberal" Christianity which considers itself free to alter the faith whenever the faith looks perplexing or repellent must be completely stagnant. Progress is made only into a resisting material.

From this there follows a corollary about the apologist's private reading. There are two questions he will naturally ask himself. (1) Have I been "keeping up," keeping abreast of recent movements in theology? (2) Have I stood firm (*super monstratas via* [i.e., "on the appointed way"]) amid all these "winds of doctrine"? I want to say emphatically that the second question is far the more important of the two. Our upbringing and the whole atmosphere of the world we live in make it certain that our main temptation will be that of yielding to winds of doctrine, not that of ignoring them. We are not at all likely to be hidebound; we are very likely to be the slaves of fashion. If one has to choose between reading the new books and reading the old, one must choose the old: not because they are necessarily better but because they contain precisely those truths of which our own age is neglectful. The standard of permanent Christianity must be kept clear in our minds and it is against that standard that we must test all contemporary thought. In fact, we must at all costs not move with the times. We serve One who said "Heaven and Earth shall move with the times, but my words shall not move with the times."

I am speaking, so far of theological reading. Scientific reading is a different matter. If you know any science it is very desirable that you should keep it up. We have to answer the current scientific attitude toward Christianity, not the attitude scientists adopted one hundred years ago. Science is in continual change and we must try to keep abreast of it. We may mention such things; but we must mention them lightly and without claiming that they are more than "interesting." Sentences beginning "Science has now proved" should be avoided. If we try to base our apologetic on some recent development in science, we shall usually find that just as we have put the finishing touches to our argument science has changed its mind and quietly withdrawn the theory we have been using as our foundation stone. *Timeo Dananos e dona ferentes* [literally, "I fear the

Greeks even when they bring gifts”, but note the quote is from Virgil’s Aeneid and is made by someone who is suspicious about the apparent gift of the Trojan horse] is a sound principle.

While we are on the subject of science, let me digress for a moment. I believe that any Christian who is qualified to write a good popular book on any science may do much more by that than by a directly apologetic work. The difficulty we are up against is this. We can make people (often) attend to the Christian point of view for half an hour or so but the moment they have gone away from our lecture or laid down our article, they are plunged back into a world where the opposite position is taken for granted. As long as that situation exists, widespread success is simply impossible. We must attack the enemy’s lines of communication. What we want is not more little books about Christianity, but more little books by Christians on other subjects--with their Christianity latent... You can see this most easily if you look at it the other way round. Our faith is not very likely to be shaken by any book on Hinduism. But if wherever we read an elementary book on Geology, botany, Politics, or Astronomy, we found that its implications were Hindu, that would shake us. It is not the books written in direct defense of materialism that make the modern man a materialist; it is the materialistic assumptions in all the other books. In the same way, it is not books on Christianity that will really trouble him. But he would be troubled if, whenever he wanted a cheap popular introduction to some science, the best work on the market was always by a Christian. The first step to the reconversion of this country is a series, produced by Christians, which can beat the Penguin and the Thinkers Library on their own ground. Its Christianity would have to be latent, not explicit: and of course its science perfectly honest. Science twisted in the interest of apologetics would be sin and folly. But I must return to my immediate subject.

Our business is to present that which is timeless (the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow) in the particular language of our own age. The bad preacher does exactly the opposite: he may think about the Beveridge Report¹ and talk about the coming of the kingdom. The core of his thought is merely contemporary; only the superficialities [i.e., “the outward appearance”] is traditional. But your teaching must be timeless at its heart and wear a modern dress.

This raises the question of theology and politics. The nearest I can get to a settlement of the frontier problem between them is this: that theology teaches us what ends are desirable and what means are lawful, while politics teaches what means are effective. Thus theology tells

us that every man ought to have a decent wage. Politics tells by what means this is likely to be attained. Theology tells us which of these means are consistent with justice and charity. On the political question guidance comes not from revelation but from natural prudence, knowledge of complicated facts and ripe experience. If we have these qualifications we may, of course, state our political opinions: but then we must make it quite clear that we are giving our personal judgment and have no command from the Lord. Not many priests have these qualifications. Most political sermons teach the congregation nothing except what newspapers are taken at the rectory.

Our great danger at present is lest the church should continue to practice a merely missionary technique in what has become a missionary situation. A century ago our task was to edify those who had been brought up in the faith: our present task is chiefly to convert and instruct the infidels. Great Britain is as much a part of the mission field as China. Now if you were sent to the Bantus you would be taught their language and traditions. You need similar teaching about the language and mental habits of your own uneducated and unbelieving fellow countrymen. Many priests are quite ignorant on this subject. What I know about it I have learned from talking in R.A.F. [i.e., Royal Air Force] camps.

They were mostly inhabited by Englishmen and, therefore, some of what I shall say may be irrelevant to the situation in Wales. You will sift out what does not apply.

(1) I find that the uneducated Englishman is an almost total sceptic about history. I had expected he would disbelieve the Gospels because they contain miracles; but he really disbelieves them because they deal with things that happened two thousand years ago. He would disbelieve equally in the battle of Actium if he heard of it. To those who have had our kind of education, his state of mind is very difficult to realize. To us the present has always appeared as one section in a huge continuous process. In his mind the present occupies almost the whole field of vision. Beyond it, isolated from it, and quite unimportant, is something called "the old days"-- a small, comic jungle in which highwaymen, Queen Elizabeth, knights-in-armor, etc. wander about. Then (strangest of all) beyond the old days come a picture of "primitive man." He is "science," not "history," and is therefore felt to be much more real than the old days. In other words, the prehistoric is much more believed in than the historic.

(2) He has a distrust (very rational in the state of his knowledge) of ancient texts. Thus a man has sometimes said to me, “These records were written in the days before printing, weren’t they? And you haven’t got the original bit of paper, have you? So what it comes to is that someone wrote something and someone else copied it and someone else copied that and so on. Well, by the time it comes to us, it won’t be in the least like the original” This is a difficult objection to deal with because one cannot, there and then, start teaching the whole science of textual criticism. But at this point their real religion (i.e. faith in “science”) has come to my aid. The assurance that there is a “science” called “textual criticism” and that its results (not only as regard the New Testament, but as regards ancient texts in general) are generally accepted, will usually be received without objection. (I need hardly point out that the word “text” must not be used, since to your audience it means only “a scriptural quotation.”)

(3) A sense of sin is almost totally lacking. Our situation is thus very different from that of the apostles. The Pagans (and still more the metuentes [literally, “fearing,” but a term applied by Roman writers to Jewish proselytes or “God-fearing” people]) to whom they preached were haunted by a sense of guilt and to them the Gospel was, therefore, “good news.” We address people who have been trained to believe that whatever goes wrong in the world is someone else’s fault--the capitalists’, the government’s, the Nazis, the generals’, etc. They approach God Himself as his judges. They want to know, not whether they can be acquitted for sin, but whether He can be acquitted for creating such a world.

In attacking this fatal insensibility it is useless to direct attention (a) To sins your audience do not commit, or (b) To things they do, but do not regard as sins. They are usually not drunkards. They are mostly fornicators, but then they do not feel fornication to be wrong. It is, therefore, useless to dwell on either of these subjects. (Now that contraceptives have removed the obvious uncharitable element in fornication I do not myself think we can expect people to recognize it as sin until they have accepted Christianity as a whole.)

I cannot offer you a water tight technique for awakening the sense of sin. I can only say that, in my experience, if one begins from the sin that has been one’s own chief problem during the last week, one is very often surprised at the way this shaft goes home. But whatever method we use, our continual effort must be to get their mind away from public affairs and “crime” and bring them down to brass tacks--to the whole network of spite, greed, envy, unfairness, and conceit in the lives of “ordinary decent people” like themselves (and ourselves).

(4) We must learn the language of our audience. And let me say at the outset that it is no use at all laying down a priori what the “plain man” does or does not understand. You have to find out by experience. Thus most of us would have supposed that the change from “may truly and indifferently minister justice” to “may truly and impartially” made that phrase easier to the uneducated; but a priest of my acquaintance discovered that his sexton [i.e., a person who looks after the church building and grounds] saw no difficulty in “indifferently” (“It means making no difference between one man and another,” he said) but had no idea what “impartially” meant.

On this question of language the best thing I can do is to make a list of words which are used by the people in a sense different from ours.

ATONEMENT. Does not really exist in a spoken modern English, though it would be recognized as “a religious word.” Insofar as it conveys any meaning to the uneducated I think it means compensation. No one word will express to them what Christians mean by atonement: you must paraphrase.

BEING. (noun) Never means merely “entity” in popular speech. Often it means what we should call a “personal being” (e.g. a man said to me “I believe in the Holy Ghost but I don’t think He is a being!”)

CATHOLIC. Means papistical [i.e., relating to the Roman Catholic Church]

CHARITY. Means (a) alms (b) a “charitable organization” (c) Much more rarely--indulgence (i.e. a “charitable” attitude toward a man is conceived as one that denies or condones his sins, not as one that loves the sinner in spite of them).

CHRISTIAN. Has come to include almost no idea of belief. Usually a vague term of approval. The question “What do you call a Christian?” has been asked of me again and again. The answer they wish to receive is “A Christian is a decent chap who is unselfish, etc.”

CHURCH. Means (a) A sacred building, (b) the clergy. Does not suggest to them the “company of all faithful people.” Generally used in a bad sense. Direct defense of the church is part of our duty; but use of the word church where there is not time to defend it alienates sympathy and should be avoided where possible.

CREATIVE. Now means merely “talented,” “original.” The idea of creation in the theological sense is absent from their minds.

CREATURE means “beast,” “irrational animal.” Such an expression as “We are only creatures” would almost certainly be misunderstood.

CRUCIFIXION, CROSS, etc. Centuries of hymnody and religious cant have so exhausted these words that they now very faintly—if at all—convey the idea of execution by torture. It is better to paraphrase; and, for the same reason, to say “flogged” for the New Testament “scourged.”

DOGMA. Used by the people only in a bad sense to mean “unproved assertion delivered in an arrogant manner.”

IMMACULATE CONCEPTION. In the mouth of an uneducated speaker always means Virgin Birth.

MORALITY means chastity.

PERSONAL. I had argued for at least ten minutes with a man about the existence of a “personal devil” before I discovered that “personal” meant to him “corporeal” I suspect this of being widespread. When they say they don’t believe in a “personal God” they may often mean only that they are not anthropomorphists.

POTENTIAL. When used at all is used in an engineering sense: never means “possible.”

PRIMITIVE. Means crude, clumsy, unfinished, inefficient. “Primitive Christianity” would not mean to them at all what it does to you.

SACRIFICE. Has no associations with the temple and altar. They are familiar with this word only in the journalistic sense (“The nation must be prepared for heavy sacrifices.”)

SPIRITUAL. Means primarily immaterial, incorporeal, but with serious confusion from the Christian use of “spirit” hence the idea that whatever is “spiritual” in the sense of “not sensuous” is somehow better than anything “sensuous”: e.g. they don’t really believe that envy could be as bad as drunkenness.

VULGARITY. Usually means obscenity or “smut.” There are bad confusions (and not only in uneducated minds) between: (a) The obscene or lascivious: what is calculated to provoke lust. (b) The indecorous: what offends against good taste or propriety. (c) The vulgar proper: what is socially “low.” “Good” people tend to think (b) as sinful as (a) with the result that others feel (a) to be just as innocent as (b).

To conclude-- you must translate every bit of your theology into the vernacular. This is very troublesome and it means you can say very little in half an hour, but it is essential. It is also of the greatest service to your own thought. I have come to the conviction that if you cannot translate your thoughts into uneducated language, then your thoughts were confused. Power to translate is the test of having really understood one’s own meaning. A passage from some theological work for translation into the vernacular ought to be a compulsory paper in every ordination examination.

I turn now to the question of the actual attack. This may be either emotional or intellectual. If I speak only of the intellectual kind, that is not because I undervalue the other but because not having been given the gifts necessary for carrying it out, I cannot give advice about it. But I wish to say most emphatically that where a speaker has that gift, the direct evangelical appeal of the “Come to Jesus” type can be as overwhelming today as it was a hundred years ago. I have seen it done, preluded by a religious film and accompanied by hymn singing, and with remarkable effect. I cannot do it: but those who can ought to do it with all their might. I am not sure that the ideal missionary team ought not to consist of one who argues and one who (in the fullest sense of the word) preaches. Put up your arguer first to undermine their intellectual prejudices; then let the evangelist proper launch his appeal. I have seen this done with great success. But here I must concern myself only with the intellectual attack. *Non omnia possumus omnes* [i.e., “It is not possible for all of us to do everything”]. And first, a word of encouragement.

Uneducated people are not irrational people. I have found that they will endure, and can follow, quite a lot of sustained argument if you go slowly. Often, indeed, the novelty of it (for they have seldom met it before) delights them.

Do not attempt to water Christianity down. There must be no pretense that you can have it with the supernatural left out. So far as I can see, Christianity is precisely the one religion from which the miraculous cannot be separated. You must frankly argue for supernaturalism from the very outset.

The two popular “difficulties” you will probably have to deal with are these. (1) “Now that we know how huge the universe is and how insignificant the earth, it is ridiculous to believe that the universal God should be especially interested in our concerns.” in answer to this you must first correct their error about fact. The insignificance of earth in relation to the universe is not a modern discovery: nearly two thousand years ago Ptolemy (*Almagest*, bk 1, ch. V) said that in relation to the distance of the fixed stars earth must be treated as a mathematical point without magnitude. Secondly, you should point out that Christianity says what God has done for man; it doesn’t say (because it doesn’t know) what he has or has not done in other parts of the universe. Thirdly, you might recall the parable of the one lost sheep. If earth has been specially sought by God (which we don’t know) that may not imply that it is the most important thing in the universe, but only that it has strayed. Finally, challenge the whole tendency to identify size and importance. Is an elephant more important than a man, or a man’s leg more important than his brains?

(2) “People believed in miracles in the old days because they didn’t then know that they were contrary to the Laws of Nature.” But they did. If St. Joseph didn’t know that a virgin birth was contrary to Nature (i.e. if he didn’t know the normal origin of babies), why, on discovering his wife’s pregnancy, was he “minded to put her away”? Obviously, no event would be recorded as a wonder unless the recorders knew the natural order and saw that this was an exception. If people didn’t yet know that the sun rose in the east, they wouldn’t be even interested in its once rising in the west. They would not record it as a *miraculum* [i.e. “miracle”]-nor indeed record it at all. The very idea of “miracle” presupposes knowledge of the Laws of Nature; you can’t have the idea of an exception until you have the idea of a rule.

It is very difficult to produce arguments on the popular level for the existence of God. And many of the most popular arguments seem to me invalid. Some of these may be produced in discussion by friendly members of the audience. This raises the whole problem of the “embarrassing supporter.” It is brutal (and dangerous) to repel him; it is often dishonest to agree with what he says. I usually try to avoid saying anything about the validity of his argument in itself and reply, “Yes. That may do for you and me. But I’m afraid if we take that line our friend here on my left might say etc., etc.”

Fortunately, though very oddly, I have found that people are usually disposed to hear the divinity of our Lord discussed before going into the existence of God. When I began I used, if I were giving two lectures, to devote the first to mere theism; but I soon gave up this method because it seemed to arouse little interest. The number of clear and determined atheists is apparently not very large.

When we come to the Incarnation itself, I usually find that some form of the *aut Deus aut homo* [i.e., “either God or man”] can be used. The majority of them start with the idea of the “great human teacher” who was deified by His superstitious followers. It must be pointed out how very improbable this is among Jews and how different to anything that happened to Plato, Confucius, Buddha, Mohammed. The Lord’s own words and claims (of which many are quite ignorant) must be forced home. (The whole case, on a popular level, is very well put in Chesterton’s *The Everlasting Man*.)

Something will usually have to be said about the historicity of the Gospels. You who are trained theologians will be able to do this in ways I could not. My own line was to say that I was a professional literary critic and I thought I did know the difference between legend and historical writing: that the Gospels were certainly not legends (in one sense they’re not good enough); and that if they are not history, then they are realistic prose fiction of a kind which actually never existed before the eighteenth century. Little episodes such as Jesus writing in the dust when they brought Him the woman taken in adultery (which have no doctrinal significance at all) are the mark.

One of the great difficulties is to keep before the audience’s mind the question of truth. They always think you are recommending Christianity not because it is true but because it is good. And in the discussion they will at every moment try to escape from the issue “true--false” into stuff about a good society, or morals, or the incomes of bishops, or the Spanish

Inquisition, or France, or Poland--or anything whatever. You have to keep forcing them back, and again back, to the real point. Only thus will you be able to undermine (a) Their belief that a certain amount of "religion" is desirable but one mustn't carry it too far. One must keep on pointing out that Christianity is a statement which, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important. (b) Their firm disbelief of Article XVIII². Of course it should be pointed out that, though all salvation is through Jesus, we need not conclude that He cannot save those who have not explicitly accepted Him in this life. And it should (at least in my judgement) be made clear that we are not pronouncing all other religions to be totally false, but rather saying that in Christ whatever is true in all religions is consummated and perfected. But, on the other hand, I think we must attack wherever we meet it the nonsensical idea that mutually exclusive propositions about God can both be true.

For my own part, I have sometimes told my audience that the only two things really worth considering are Christianity and Hinduism. (Islam is only the greatest of the Christian heresies, Buddhism only the greatest of the Hindu heresies. Real paganism is dead. All that was best in Judaism and Platonism survives in Christianity.) There isn't really, for an adult mind, this infinite variety of religions to consider. We may *salva reverentia* [i.e., "saving reverence" or "without infringing on reverence"] divide religions, as we do soups, into "thick" and "clear." By "thick" I mean those which have orgies and ecstasies and mysteries and local attachments: Africa is full of thick religions. By "clear" I mean those which are philosophical, ethical, and universalizing: Stoicism, Buddhism, and the Ethical Church are clear religions. Now if there is a true religion, it must be both thick and clear: for the true God must have made both the child and the man, both the savage and the citizen, both the head and the belly. And the only two religions that fulfil this condition are Hinduism and Christianity. But Hinduism fulfils it imperfectly. The clear religion of the Brahman hermit in the jungle and the thick religion of the neighboring temple go on side by side. The Brahman hermit doesn't bother about the temple prostitution nor the worshiper in the temple about the hermit's metaphysics. But Christianity really breaks down the middle wall of the partition. It takes a convert from Central Africa and tells him to obey an enlightened universalist ethic: it takes a twentieth-century academic prig like me and tells me to go fasting to a mystery, to drink the blood of the Lord. The savage convert has to be clear: I have to be thick. That is how one knows one has come to the real religion.

One last word. I have found that nothing is more dangerous to one's own faith than the work of an apologist. No doctrine of that faith seems to me so spectral, so unreal as the one that I have just successfully defended in a public debate. For a moment, you see, it has seemed to rest on oneself: as a result when you go away from the debate, it seems no stronger than that weak pillar. That is why we apologists take our lives in our hands and can be saved only by falling back continually from the web of our own arguments, as from our intellectual counters, into the reality—from Christian apologetics into Christ Himself. That also is why we need one another's continual help--*oremus pro invicem*. (Let us pray for each other.)

END

¹ An influential document in the founding of the welfare state in Britain, which was published in 1942.

² Article 18 of the Church of England, which speaks "of obtaining salvation only by the name of Christ."