Encountering and Engaging a Post-modern Context:
Applying the Apologetic Model in Acts 17

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"Contemporary apologists for Christianity operate in a very different context from the preachers in Acts. The closest parallel to our own situation is Paul's encounter with paganism in Acts 17. In modern western culture, few have any knowledge of the biblical background assumed in the apostolic preaching to the Jews. But those who wish to communicate the gospel to our own generation would do well to recover and apply those same perspectives, even as Paul does embryonically in Acts 17."

(David Peterson)

Going Beyond McGrath and Carson

Alister E. McGrath and Donald A. Carson are among the few contemporary apologists who have reflected in depth both on the post-modern challenge to Christian apologetics and on how to apply the apologetic model in Acts 17:16-34 to this specific challenge.

In their most significant apologetic contributions, both authors rely on the Acts 17 model. Whereas McGrath interprets and applies Paul's use of God-given points of contact in order to generate interest for the Christian Gospel – as inherently attractive – in a post-modern context, Carson interprets and applies Paul's use of 'the biblical storyline' in order to confront post-modern beliefs with a coherent Christian worldview. This shows the legitimacy of the focus on Acts 17:16-34 as an apologetic model in the post-modern context.

This paper recognizes these crucial contributions from McGrath and Carson but identifies the need for further work in two key areas. *First*, despite their contextual sensitivity, neither author shows an adequate contextual understanding of 'post-modern phenomena'. *Secondly*, despite helpful applications of parts of Paul's arguments in Acts 17, neither author has developed these arguments comprehensively and contextually.

Post-modern Context, Mentality and Worldview

The words post-modern, postmodernity and postmodernism are used by an increasing number of critics to describe key aspects of the contemporary social, cultural and intellectual context. It may be helpful to distinguish between three usages of 'post-modern' as a concept.

First, 'post-modern' has been used as a *sociological* concept to describe a social context increasingly characterised by consumerism, communication and information technology, and globalisation. Interestingly, the sociological concepts have changed, from 'the post-industrial society' in the 1970's, through 'the information society' in the 1980's, to 'the

post-modern society' (or postmodernity) in the 1990's. It seems difficult, however, to imagine a genuinely post-modern society, in view of such persistent modern phenomena as the present dominance of capitalism and the prevalent belief in technology. A more appropriate sociological description of the contemporary Western social context would thus be *hyper*modern or *ultra*-modern.

Secondly, 'post-modern' has been used as a *psychological* concept to describe the mentality of young people growing up in an ultramodern context. Positively, this refers to a new emerging literacy among young people who know who to navigate and communicate in a digital, interactive media context. Negatively, this refers to a widespread feeling of a decentred self in an age of fragmentation and simulation, "where reality is being broken down into images …in a post-modern pastiche of apparently meaningless montage" (Houston 1998:185).

Thirdly, 'post-modern' has been used as a *philosophical* concept to describe the influential contemporary worldviews of philosophical and popular postmodernism. The first is characterized by epistemological scepticism, philosophical pluralism, and philosophical naturalism (Carson). The latter is a popular tendency to move "beyond the 'modern', scientifically based view of the world by blending a *scepticism* about technology, objectivity, absolutes, and total explanations with a *stress* on image and appearance, personal interpretation, pleasure and the exploration of every spiritual and material perspective" (Cook 1996:9). Claims that postmodernism is 'the general intellectual outlook' (McGrath) and 'has a vast influence on contemporary culture' (Carson) probably need to be qualified, at least in terms of the academy (since such thinking often seems confined to the literature, social sciences, and religious studies departments at universities) but possibly also in terms of popular culture.

An informed apologetic needs to take both the social ultramodern context and the post-modern mentality, as well as philosophical and popular postmodernism, into account.

Engaging in Apologetics in a Post-modern Context

Christian apologetics responds to relevant questions, objections and alternatives to the truth claims of the Gospel. On the one hand, honest questions arise in a post-modern context as a result of a widespread cultural *openness* to personal stories and arguments related to 'the epistemic permission' of the Christian faith. On the other hand, the Christian apologist encounter a widespread cultural *aversion* towards claims and arguments related to 'the epistemic obligation' of the Christian faith. This latter aspect is due to influential objections from philosophical post-modernism:

> "Nietzsche and Foucault, among others, argue that claims to truth often represent disguised attempts to legitimate uses of power… With the rise of post-modern notions of the self, of language and meaning, and of society, this issue has become perhaps a more far-reaching cause for disbelief about claims to truth on the part of Christian theology than older, more tired appeals to materialist world-views as monolithic responses of secular modernity." (Thiselton 1995:ix)

It should also be noticed that these post-modern philosophical attempts to deconstruct the concepts of truth and identity correspond to the post-modern experience (McGrath) of pluralism and of a decentred and deconstructed self. This contextual understanding must inform the creative development of Paul's arguments in Acts 17 for a post-modern setting.

'The Natural Theology Argument' for a Post-modern Context

Taking Acts 17 as his model, Alister E. McGrath argues that the post-modern experience of 'a sense of longing' points to and is fulfilled in a God who can and wants to be known. This application of Paul's '*natural theology argument*' seems legitimate but incomplete. A more adequate application, however, would have to address key issues related to the justification of Christian claims about humanity, the universe, and God.

1. The post-modern experience of 'a deconstructed and decentred self' constitutes a signifi-

cant point of contact for Christian claims about fundamental human identity in God. However, such claims about the adequacy of a Christian *view of humanity* would have to be justified over against the post-modern re-construction of identities, which takes place through various meaning-routes such as 'the plastic self', 'the expressive self', and 'the subsumed self' (Lyon 2000:91-96).

2. Popular postmodernism claims to be open to the exploration of any secular and religious 'story'. Due to this curiosity and an increasing biblical illiteracy, such postmodernists may thus be interested in a Christian *view of the universe*. If so, arguments on 'the ordering of the world' and 'the beauty of the world', as indicators of a personal Creator and Sustainer, need to be developed for post-modern seekers.

3. The original 'natural theology argument' seems to presuppose a context of competing religious claims, or at least openness to 'signals of transcendence'. This would imply that over against a thoroughly secular perspective, such as the naturalism of philosophical postmodernism, Paul's 'natural theology argument' would have to be extended to include arguments for the existence of a personal Creator. Despite their disputed status, such arguments may (if argued non-coercively) present a challenge to post-modern naturalists to consider the possibility and plausibility of a Judeo-Christian *view of God*. This presupposes that the apologist can show that these arguments are more than Christian linguistic and social constructs and don't mask a Christian play for power.

'The Ultimate Authority Argument' for a Post-modern Context

D. A. Carson argues that the argument 'God made us and we owe him' justifies a Christian view of sin and divine judgment over against post-modern notions of morality and sin as social constructs. This is a legitimate application of key parts of Paul's '*ultimate authority argument*'. A more adequate application, however, would have to address key issues related to the justification of Christian claims about divine authority as legitimate and as obliging humanity.

1. In view of post-modern suspicion of (absolute) authority, *legitimacy* becomes a key issue for the justification of Christian claims regarding divine ultimate authority. The argument that the Sovereign Author of life has a legitimate authority over life, as Carson argues in his valid application of Paul's argument, may have to be supplemented in a post-modern context with an argument for the non-manipulative nature of God's claim to ultimate authority. A number of contemporary apologists and theologians emphasize that 'the theology of the cross' constitutes a legitimate basis for such an argument.

2. In view of the subtle religious shift from obligation to consumption in the post-modern context, *obligation* becomes another key issue for the justification of Christian claims regarding divine ultimate authority. As indicated by Carson, the meaning and basis of human morality seem to constitute significant points of contact in this context. This would imply that a sequential argument may need to be developed, where a) moral obligations to my neighbour are shown to be inevitable also in a consumerist culture, b) such moral obligations are shown to be objective (and thus point to the non-relativistic nature of morality), and c) this objective morality is shown to have a plausible basis in the nature of God as the divine Lawgiver. Thus, 'moral obligation' would make sense both in relation to my neighbour and (ultimately) to God.

'The Resurrection Argument' for a Post-modern Context

McGrath argues that the post-modern experience of 'a sense of anxiety' is a significant point of contact for claims about the Resurrection, and he also develops an argument for post-modern seekers on the basis of the Resurrection. These are legitimate applications of key parts of Paul's '*Resurrection argument*'. A more adequate application, however, would have to address key issues related to the justification of Christian claims about the Resurrection as resonating with ultimate human concerns, indicating the uniqueness and authority of Jesus, and being based on sufficient, available evidence.

1. The claim that the Resurrection *resonates with ultimate human concerns* need to be justi-

fied in the context of ambiguous post-modern attitudes to life, where anxiety, longing and restlessness (McGrath's emphasis) seem to exist alongside cynicism, irony and 'nihilism with a smile' (Wim Rietkerk). This means that a 'positive deconstruction' of the latter views may need to be developed, where the application of an argumentative strategy of 'relativizing the relativizers' seems appropriate: "By this is meant applying to sceptics the scepticism they apply to others, thus pushing them out toward the negative consequences of their own beliefs." (Guinness 2000:101.) If so, the absurdity and despair of postmodernism becomes apparent. This may lead to an increased appreciation of the adequacy of the 'Resurrection hope' for humanity in a post-modern context of fading or lost hopes.

2. The claim that 'the Resurrection argument' *indicates the uniqueness and authority of Jesus* needs to be justified in the context of a widespread, continuous interest in Jesus as a figure of identification and legitimation for a number of worldviews. In view of post-modern explorations of various perspectives, the Christian 'story' of Jesus (as found in the New Testament Gospels) must be shown as coherent and attractive over against such competing 'Jesus-stories'. This may imply that the evidential basis for the various 'stories' is seen as a key issue, over against popular post-modern claims about the irrelevance of history.

3. Neither McGrath nor Carson assesses the evidential force of the Resurrection in a post-modern context. However, the claim that 'the Resurrection argument' *is based on sufficient, available evidence* needs to be justified over against the historical relativism (i.e. the non-realism and the non-objectivism) of philosophical postmodernism. If the general credibility of historical knowledge is established over against this view, then the specific case for the historicity of the Resurrection may be argued. Even though 'the Resurrection argument' seems preferable in a context of competing theistic truth claims, it may even present a challenge to philosophical postmodernism when argued on the basis of a 'minimal facts approach'. (This approach implies using as historically established evidence only those reported facts in the Gospels that are accepted by a majority of contemporary critical scholars.). Thus understood, 'the Resurrection argument' would have a vital role in establishing the credibility of the Christian worldview in a post-modern context.

Further reading

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