

**Theology in Support of Apologetics:
Responding to Five Arguments Against Orthodox Christianity**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
A Theological / Apologetic Response to the Alleged Incompatibility of Science and Faith	2
Responding to Modern Modalism	6
The Person of Christ: Incarnate or Adopted?	10
The Work of Christ: Moral Influence or Penal Substitution?	15
Do All Religions Refer to the Same Objective Reality? Evaluating John Hick's Pluralism	18
Conclusion	23
Bibliography	25

Introduction

Apologetics is not synonymous with theology. However, while the disciplines are not the same, they are related. As Douglas Groothuis explains,

Apologetics is linked to theology, philosophy and evangelism, but it is not reducible to any one of these disciplines. The conceptual content of apologetics depends on theology, the goal of which is to systematically and coherently articulate the truth claims of the Bible according to various topics, such as the doctrine of God, salvation and Christ. ... Therefore, the discipline of apologetics requires skill in reading the Bible aright, since one would not want to defend something not warranted by Scripture.¹

A proper understanding of theology is crucial for the apologist in responding to various challenges to the orthodox Christian faith.

One example comes in the realm of the alleged tension between science and faith, in which a proper appreciation for the doctrine of creation demonstrates not only compatibility, but that the Christian faith provides necessary support for the scientific enterprise. Likewise, orthodox Christianity faces modern challenges from “Oneness Theology” and its modalistic framework. This challenge is refuted, though, via an understanding of the theological grounding for the doctrine of the Trinity. Bart Ehrman has published a New York Times bestseller claiming that the belief in Jesus as a coequal member of a trinitarian Godhead was a later development and not the view held by the earliest Christians. However, biblical evidence surrounding the person of Christ shows how Ehrman’s arguments are inadequate.

Horace Bushnell has sought to advance an alternative view of the work of Christ, suggesting the purpose of the atonement was merely moral influence and not penal substitution. A theological examination of Isaiah 53, though, alongside Jesus’ mode of self-reference, shows

¹ Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 27.

why his dismissal of substitutionary atonement fails. Finally, John Hick has challenged Christianity's claim to exclusivity, arguing that all religions refer to the same ultimate reality in their own culturally conditioned ways. However, his attempted harmonization is based on a self-refuting foundation and descriptions of the various world religions that end up stripping them of all meaningful detail.

These are but five examples, but they show how a proper understanding of Christian theology is essential in order for the modern apologist to respond to various challenges to orthodox Christianity.

A Theological / Apologetic Response to the Alleged Incompatibility of Science and Faith

In his book *Faith Versus Fact: Why Science and Religion are Incompatible*, Jerry A. Coyne gives voice to a view that has grown increasingly common throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, specifically the conclusion that science and religious faith are incompatible.

Science and religion - unlike say, business and religion - are competitors at discovering truths about nature. And science is the only field that has the ability to disprove the truth claims of religion, and has done so repeatedly ... Religion, on the other hand, has no ability to overturn the truths found by science.²

Coyne goes beyond merely labelling the two fields as incompatible. He labels them competitors, as though they were combatants in an arena from which only one can emerge. In his view, the victor of that conflict is clearly science.

Not all skeptics take quite so strong a stance. Some, like Stephen Jay Gould, have tried to temper their claims of incompatibility such that it is not a "fight to the death," but rather more

² Jerry A. Coyne, *Faith Versus Fact: Why Science and Religion are Incompatible* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015), 5.

akin to partners in a larger task, each with their own separate, distinct duties. Gould labels science and religion as “Non-Overlapping Magisteria,”³ which he explains by stating

I do not see how science and religion could be unified, or even synthesized, under any common scheme of explanation or analysis; but I also do not understand why the two enterprises should experience any conflict. Science tries to document the factual character of the natural world, and to develop theories that coordinate and explain these facts. Religion, on the other hand, operates in the equally important, but utterly different, realm of human purposes, meanings and values – subjects that the factual domain of science might illuminate, but can never resolve.⁴

Neither of these approaches to science and faith can be acceptable to Christians. Gould’s distinction, for example, depends entirely upon setting up theological boundaries that would strip Christianity of much of what it has to say. As John Polkinghorne explains,

Not only is [Gould’s Non-Overlapping Magisteria] contrary to actual experience; its approach is rationally flawed. To maintain its asserted separation it needs to appeal to highly dubious dichotomies, such as the notion that science deals only with public facts and religion only with private opinions. Both halves of this statement are in error. There are no interesting scientific facts that are not already interpreted facts.⁵

A proper understanding of Christian theology, however, can help respond to arguments such as those advanced by Coyne or Gould. In fact, contrary to the arguments of these skeptics, the biblical doctrine of creation actually fosters scientific investigation.

Scripture depicts all that exists (outside of God himself) as having been the creative handiwork of a transcendent, intelligent being. The very first verse of the Bible states, “In the

³ Stephen Jay Gould, *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life* (New York: Ballentine, 1999), 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵ John Polkinghorne, “The Continuing Interaction of Science and Religion,” *Zygon: Journal of Religion & Science* 40, no. 1 (2005): 45.

beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”⁶ Paul told the church in Rome that “since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.”⁷ God’s creation, therefore, reflects his nature. The Old Testament speaks of the same conclusion, with Psalm 19 proclaiming, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.”⁸

Douglas Groothuis highlights a number of theological implications of verses such as these. They indicate that because the universe was created by an orderly God, it can be expected to “exhibit order, pattern and regularity.”⁹ Further, because God is sustaining the laws of nature, we can expect them to remain uniform no matter where we look.¹⁰ Finally, if the universe was created by a loving God who longs for us to know him, and if (as Romans 1:20 states) the creation reflects the creator, then we can expect the universe to be intelligible. Our investigation into its inner workings will not be in vain.¹¹

Any scientific endeavor is by necessity based upon the foundation that Christian theology provides. None of these factors can be explained (nor even be expected) on a purely naturalistic worldview. If the universe is the work of a loving intelligent creator, however, the necessary underpinnings for scientific inquiry fall into place. Millard J. Erickson argues that the biblical

⁶ Gen 1:1 (NIV).

⁷ Rom 1:20 (NIV).

⁸ Ps 19:1 (NIV).

⁹ Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, 102.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 103.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

doctrine of creation provides “sufficient justification for scientifically investigating” all that God has made.¹²

Science assumes that there is within the creation some sort of order or pattern it can discover. If the universe were random and, consequently, all the facts scientists gather about it were merely a haphazard collection, no real understanding of nature would be possible. But by affirming that everything has been made in accordance with a logical pattern, the doctrine of creation substantiates science’s assumption.”¹³

Further, nothing in the Christian worldview forecloses natural conclusions for observed data. In fact, Christianity assumes that by and large the world will operate in accordance with predictable natural laws (a miracle is recognized as such precisely because it is a rare event that goes outside what we would expect through the natural laws). However, a Christian worldview also allows for the possibility of supernatural explanations whereas a naturalistic worldview does not. A scientist who insists on purely naturalistic presuppositions, for example, will a priori reject any evidence that suggests the causal action of an intelligent agent in nature, not because the evidence does not support that conclusion but merely because their prior intellectual commitments demand that such conclusions not be entertained. The Christian doctrine of creation removes these arbitrary limitations upon scientific exploration.

Therefore, the Christian, not the secular worldview grounds the foundational assumptions that are inherent in science. If the universe resulted from God’s creative act, then we should expect it to be intelligible and uniform. Further, a Christian worldview allows for explanations that are not available to the naturalist, permitting a more robust scientific inquiry. Christian theology, therefore, demonstrates that far from being adversaries or totally distinct realms,

¹² Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 356.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 356-57.

Christianity provides the foundation for science, and science without Christianity is left proverbially floating unsupported in mid-air.

Responding to Modern Modalism

According to Erickson, in the late second and third centuries modalistic monarchianism gained adherents such as Noctus of Smyrna and Praxeas.¹⁴ Sabellius, however, in the early third century articulated its most sophisticated formulation.¹⁵ Erickson explains,

The essential idea of this school of thought is that there is one Godhead that may be variously designated as Father, Son, or Spirit. The terms do not stand for real distinctions, but are merely names that are appropriate and applicable at different times. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are identical—they are successive revelations of the same person.¹⁶

While the church rejected this view, modern variations can be found even today in a branch of Pentecostalism known as “Oneness Theology.”

David K. Bernard advocates for this view, arguing that adherents of Oneness Theology “believe that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are manifestations, modes, offices, or relationships that the one God has displayed to humans.”¹⁷ David S. Norris says that “Oneness adherents decry any ontological distinction between persons ‘in a Godhead.’ ... a Oneness Christology teaches that the God of the Old Testament was the Father of Jesus, the very Spirit that overshadowed

¹⁴ Ibid., 304.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ David K. Bernard, *The Oneness of God* (Hazelwood, MO: Word Aflame Press, 2001), chap. 1, Kindle.

Mary.”¹⁸ Marcus J. Borg describes the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as different “roles” God plays.¹⁹

Erickson, however, points out serious flaws with this modalistic interpretation of the Scriptures. First, the Bible narrates several instances in which all three members of the Trinity are present simultaneously.

The baptismal scene, where the Father speaks to the Son, and the Spirit descends on the Son, is an example, together with all those passages where Jesus speaks of the coming of the Spirit, or speaks of or to the Father. If modalism is accepted, Jesus’s words and actions in these passages must be regarded as misleading.²⁰

Bernard responds by arguing, for instance, that neither the descent of the dove nor the voice at Jesus’ baptism necessarily indicate the presence of distinct persons in the Godhead. Rather, he claims these are “only another manifestation of the omnipresent Spirit of God.”²¹ The voice was merely a manifestation intended to introduce Jesus as the Son of God. Similarly, the dove was a visual affirmation for the benefit of John the Baptist.²²

However, Bernard’s response fails to explain the biblical data. The voice that came from heaven when Jesus was baptized said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”²³ This was no mere impersonal declaration. The voice used distinct personal pronouns

¹⁸ David S. Norris, *I Am: A Oneness Pentecostal Theology* (Hazelwood, MO: WAP Academic, 2001), chap. 1, Kindle.

¹⁹ Marcus J. Borg, *The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1997), 97-98.

²⁰ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 304.

²¹ Bernard, *The Oneness of God*, chap. 8.

²² Ibid.

²³ Matt 3:17 (NIV).

(“my” and “I” as distinguished from “him”) to refer to two subjects, the “I” and the “him.”

Bernard’s attempt to explain away this passage runs afoul of basic grammatical practices.

Bernard also seeks to refute the evidence from the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus prayed to the Father, which would seem to indicate communication between two distinct subjects. He states

If the prayers of Jesus demonstrate that the divine nature of Jesus is different from the Father, then Jesus is inferior to the Father in deity. In other words, if Jesus prayed as God then His position in the Godhead would be somehow inferior to the other ‘persons.’ This one example effectively destroys the concept of a trinity of coequal persons.²⁴

First, even if Bernard were correct in his assessment, this would not support modalism. It would merely show some inherent hierarchy within the different members of the Godhead.

Second, there is a red herring in Bernard’s response. No trinitarian would say that Jesus praying to the Father demonstrates a difference between their “divine natures.” There is one divine nature, but within the one Godhead are three distinct persons. The fact that Jesus prays to the Father shows the presence of two distinct persons, not two different natures.

Third, yet again Bernard ignores the significance of distinct personal pronouns. While praying Jesus says, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.”²⁵ Jesus directs his prayer to a distinct subject, the “Father.” He contrasts the Father’s (i.e. “your”) will from his own (i.e., “my”). Further, even if Bernard could somehow conflate the distinct persons referenced in the prayer, he would still need to overcome the clear declaration that each subject had its own “will.” Every indication in this prayer shows one subject with his own will praying to another subject with a separate will.

²⁴ Bernard, *The Oneness of God*, chap. 8.

²⁵ Luke 22:42 (NIV).

Finally, the mere fact that Jesus prays to the Father does not require the conclusion that he was inferior in nature. It could just as easily be indicative of a temporary subordination in function while Jesus was conducting his ministry on Earth. The latter interpretation is more consistent with the broader context of Scripture, such as Philippians 2:6 (“Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage”²⁶) and John 1:1 (“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”²⁷), both of which clearly teach equality between the Father and Son.

Modalism also fails to account for the numerous plural references to God, for example Genesis 1:1 (“Let us make mankind in our image”) and 11:7 (“Let us go down and confuse their language”) or Isaiah 6:8 (“Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?”). In each instance, God is referred to in the plural despite Scripture’s clear and repeated declaration that there is only one God.

Erickson points out that some may attempt to claim these are instances of the plural of majesty.²⁸ However, according to G.A.F. Knight, the plural of majesty was not even used in ancient Israel. Thus, this attempt to explain away the plural references inappropriately imposes a much later practice upon a time period long before and a location far removed from where it was used.²⁹ Further, as Erickson argues, some of these passages do not stick to the use of the plural, but shift between singular and plural when speaking of the same subject; i.e., God.³⁰ If this were

²⁶ Phil 2:6 (NIV).

²⁷ John 1:1 (NIV).

²⁸ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 299.

²⁹ G.A.F. Knight, *A Biblical Approach to the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1953), 20.

³⁰ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 299.

a plural of majesty, it is used inconsistently. Rather, the inspired Scripture describes God both in singular and plural terms, often in immediate succession, which is more consistent with a trinitarian as opposed to modalistic understanding of God's nature.

The Person of Christ: Incarnate or Adopted?

Adoptionism, as explained by Erickson, is the view that "Jesus of Nazareth was merely a human during the early years of his life. At some point, however, probably Jesus's baptism (or perhaps his resurrection), God 'adopted' him as his Son."³¹ Those who believe Jesus was adopted at his baptism note the similarity between the words spoken by the Father ("You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased"³²) and Psalm 2:7 ("You are my son; today I have become your Father"³³), which the author of Hebrews twice applies to Jesus.³⁴ According to Norman Geisler, adoptionism first appeared in the second and third centuries, but re-emerged and flourished in the eighth.³⁵

More recently, some scholars have suggested that adoptionism was actually the belief of the earliest Christians. Bart Ehrman, for example, claims that both Matthew and Luke, the middle of the two Gospels in the order the four were written, contain adoptionist Christologies. Ehrman argues, "If you read their accounts closely, you will see that they have nothing to do

³¹ Ibid., 666.

³² Mark 1:11 (NIV).

³³ Psalm 2:7 (NIV).

³⁴ In Hebrews 1:5 and 5:5. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 667.

³⁵ Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology, Volume Two: God Creation* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2003), 297.

with the idea that Christ existed before he was conceived. In these two Gospels, Jesus comes into existence at the moment of his conception. He did not exist before.”³⁶

Simon J. Gathercole summarizes Ehrman’s position.

According to *How Jesus Became God*, the view of Jesus held by the earliest believers was that after Jesus’ death, God elevated him to a position of supreme authority... Not only that, but God had ‘adopted’ Jesus as his Son, even if he did not have the same kind of divine nature as his newfound Father.³⁷

Incarnational Christology, as the term is used by Ehrman, refers to the orthodox view that Jesus is a pre-existent person in the trinitarian Godhead. Adoptionist Christology, in contrast, refers to the position that Jesus was a man who at some point in his life was “adopted” and granted some kind of special status by God, albeit still inferior in nature to God.

Gathercole points out that in order to argue in favor of an early adoptionist Christology, Ehrman ignores large swaths of biblical evidence. For example, throughout both Matthew and Luke, Jesus makes repeated “I have come” statements (e.g., “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance;”³⁸ “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them;”³⁹ “I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!”⁴⁰). These statements presuppose that Jesus was previously in one place, then came to another in order to accomplish his mission. His ministry

³⁶ Bart D. Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee* (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 243.

³⁷ Simon J. Gathercole, “What Did the First Christians Think about Jesus?,” in *How God Became Jesus: The Real Origins of Belief in Jesus’ Divine Nature*, ed. Michael F. Bird (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 95.

³⁸ Luke 5:32 (NIV).

³⁹ Matthew 5:17 (NIV).

⁴⁰ Luke 12:49 (NIV).

extended all throughout Israel, so this statement cannot be regarded as travelling from one geographic location in Israel to another. No part of his mission was so geographically defined. However, these statements make sense if Jesus was pre-existent in Heaven, then came to Earth in order to accomplish these various goals. Thus, both Matthew and Luke repeatedly quote Jesus speaking as if his pre-existence is a given.⁴¹

Ehrman, like others who believe the Bible speaks of adoptionism, also claims that the Father used language of adoption at Jesus' baptism. Speaking of the voice heard from heaven Ehrman claims, "This voice does not appear to be stating a preexisting fact. It appears to be making a declaration. It is at this time that Jesus becomes the Son of God for Mark's Gospel."⁴² However, this is nothing more than a bare assertion by Ehrman. It may not "appear" to be stating a preexisting fact to Ehrman, but the overall context of Mark's Gospel certainly appears to do so.

First, like Matthew and Luke, Mark also includes "I have come" statements that are strong indicators of preexistence (e.g., "On hearing this, Jesus said to them, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.'"⁴³).

Second, Gathercole points out that Ehrman is clearly picking and choosing only the evidence he believes supports his view while ignoring that which does not.

What is striking is that a voice from heaven comes later on in Mark's gospel and says something similar. At the transfiguration, God says of Jesus: 'This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!' (Mark 9:1). Presumably God is not adopting Jesus again. But it is hard to see how the voice at the baptism could refer to God's

⁴¹ Gathercole, "What Did the First Christians Think about Jesus?," 97.

⁴² Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God*, 238.

⁴³ Mark 2:17 (NIV).

adoption of Jesus and the similar-sounding voice at the transfiguration could mean something different.⁴⁴

If this language indicates that Jesus was “adopted” in the first instance, then it should equally mean the same in the second instance. However, that conclusion is absurd, which seriously calls into question Ehrman’s interpretation of this language the first time it appears.

Finally, Ehrman claims to be able to look at certain scriptures and find evidence of what the first Christians believed, dating to even before the earliest books of the New Testament were written. One such example comes from Romans 1:3-4: “...regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.”⁴⁵ Ehrman assumes that this passage is a quotation from a creed that pre-dates Paul. He draws attention to the phrase “was appointed the Son of God” in order to support his claim that this suggests an early adoptionist Christology.

However, Paul did not merely say Jesus “was appointed the Son of God.” He went on to specifically attach the modifier “in power.” Thus, by Paul’s own terms the appointment was not one of nature, but rather one of power or role. Ehrman’s response is to claim, “Paul himself probably added the phrase ‘in power’ to the creed, so that now Jesus is made the Son of God ‘in power’ at the resurrection.”⁴⁶ However, the only evidence Ehrman has for this being a Pauline addition is that without such an amendment, the passage would not meet with his preconceived conclusion that the creed was adoptionist.

⁴⁴ Gathercole, “What Did the First Christians Think about Jesus?,” 98-99.

⁴⁵ Romans 1:3-4 (NIV).

⁴⁶ Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God*, 224.

Gathercole strips Ehrman of all rhetorical flourish and lays bare the true structure of his fallacious argument.

The following syllogism is at work in this reasoning ...:
The credal formula propounds an adoptionist Christology.
“Son of God *in power*” undermines the adoptionist thought.
Therefore “*in power*” is Paul’s addition.
So Paul incorporates an ‘adoptionist’ fragment in Romans 1. But hang on – Rom 1:3-4 is not adoptionist. But we can make it adoptionist if we remove “*in power*.”⁴⁷

None of the evidence Ehrman cites for believing that the earliest Christians were adoptionists is convincing, especially when examined in conjunction with the surrounding context of the biblical texts. Ehrman repeatedly engages in selectively choosing certain passages and ignoring others. Further, his entire methodology in practice turns out to be backward. Rather than allowing the text to determine the conclusion, he starts by assuming his desired outcome, then attempts to force an interpretation on the text that will fit within that presupposed conclusion.

As Gathercole explains,

God does not “hyperexalt” Jesus above his original, preexistent condition; the point is that God superexalts him from the depths of the cross above everything below the earth, and on the earth, and even in heaven. As a result, he takes on a further role that is radically different from his earthly mission – that of final judgment.⁴⁸

This is the conclusion that best fits within the overall textual evidence and is reached in an intellectually appropriate manner.

⁴⁷ Gathercole, “What Did the First Christians Think about Jesus?,” 105.

⁴⁸ Gathercole, “What Did the First Christians Think about Jesus?,” 115.

The Work of Christ: Moral Influence or Penal Substitution?

How to best understand the atonement is a question that Christians have pondered for centuries. Because Christ's sacrifice is central to his entire mission on Earth, it is only natural that Christians would spend significant effort in trying to comprehend precisely what it was that Jesus accomplished through his death and resurrection.

One such attempt at an explanation is moral influence theory. According to Erickson,

The advocates of the moral-influence theory hold that God's nature is essentially love. They minimize such qualities as justice, holiness, and righteousness. Accordingly, humans need not fear God's justice and punishment. Thus, their problem is not that they have violated God's law and that God will (indeed, must) punish them. Rather, human attitudes keep them apart from God."⁴⁹

Specifically, humans need to be "healed" so that we may be delivered from sin. Humanity has three basic needs, all of which were met through Christ's suffering, and the satisfaction of these needs is the true meaning of the atonement.

First, "humanity needs an openness to God, an inclination to respond to his call to repentance."⁵⁰ Horace Bushnell, a late 19th century advocate for moral influence theory, describes the manner in which Christ met this need as follows.

No bad soul likes to meet the Holy one, but recoils painfully, shivers with dread, and turns away. But the foremost thing we see in Christ is not the infinite holiness, or sovereign purity; he takes us, first, on the side of our natural feeling; showing his compassions there, passing before us visaged in sorrow, groaning in distressful concern for us, dying even the bitterest conceivable death, because the love he bears to us cannot let go of us."⁵¹

⁴⁹ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 717-18.

⁵⁰ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 719.

⁵¹ Horace Bushnell, *Vicarious Sacrifice Grounded in Principles of Universal Obligation* (New York: Charles Scribner & Co., 1871), 73.

Second, humans need “a genuine and deep conviction of personal sin and a resultant repentance.”⁵² Again, Bushnell explains

We look on him whom we have pierced, and are pierced ourselves. Through the mighty bosom struggle of the agony and death, we look down, softened, into the bosom wars and woes Christ pities and dies for in us. And when we hear him say—“Of sin because ye believe not on me”—we are not chilled, or repelled, as by the icy baptism of fear and remorse, but we welcome the pain.⁵³

When we look upon the suffering endured by Christ, it causes us to reflect upon our own sin and leads to repentance.

Third, we need inspiration. It is not enough to be confronted by merely “abstract descriptions of the holiness we are to embody.” We need to see it played out before us in practice.⁵⁴ On this point Bushnell says, “We want no theologic definition of God’s perfections; but we want a friend, whom we can feel as a man, and whom it will be sufficiently accurate for us to accept and love.”⁵⁵

Bushnell challenges the assumption that Isaiah 53 supports a penal substitution theory of the atonement. Specifically, he believes that those who embrace penal substitution take phrases like “bearing of the sins” and “stripes” and force them to fit into their theory, allegedly ignoring the fact that the chapter also establishes the purpose of the “stripes” as allowing us to “live unto righteousness.”⁵⁶ Thus, he concludes, “And so of the ‘stripes;’ they are not penal stripes, inflicted for God’s satisfaction, but such kind of suffering as works a divine healing

⁵² Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 719.

⁵³ Bushnell, *Vicarious Sacrifice Grounded in Principles of Universal Obligation*, 73.

⁵⁴ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 719.

⁵⁵ Bushnell, *Vicarious Sacrifice Grounded in Principles of Universal Obligation*, 74.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 77.

in us—'By whose stripes ye were healed.'⁵⁷

However, Bushnell focuses so much on individual words that he misses the larger context. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus specifically identified himself with the suffering servant in this chapter. "It is written: 'And he was numbered with the transgressors'; and I tell you that this must be fulfilled in me. Yes, what is written about me is reaching its fulfillment."⁵⁸ This is an explicit reference to Isaiah 53:12 which states

Therefore I will give him a portion among the great,
and he will divide the spoils with the strong,
because he poured out his life unto death,
and was numbered with the transgressors.
For he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors.⁵⁹

Contrary to Bushnell's argument, the "healing" discussed in Isaiah 53 cannot be viewed as simply referring to a change of character. Verse 8 describes the suffering of the servant by saying

For he was cut off from the land of the living;
for the transgression of my people he was punished.⁶⁰

Isaiah is describing a vicarious punishment being placed upon the suffering servant, a punishment that was deserved by others.

While there certainly is an element of moral example and a demonstration of God's love inherent in the atonement, these only make sense if viewed in conjunction with, not in opposition to, penal substitution. Erickson observes that any valid insights

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Luke 22:37 (NIV).

⁵⁹ Isaiah 53:12 (NIV).

⁶⁰ Isaiah 53:8b (NIV).

from moral influence theory are wholly dependent on Christ having died *for us*, a central component of penal substitution.⁶¹

According to the moral-influence theory, Christ's death was not necessary in an objective sense. That is to say, God could have forgiven us our sins without the death of Jesus. ... But in that case, would we look upon Christ's death as a demonstration of love or an act of foolishness?⁶²

Dying when death is required to save another is a true demonstration of love. However, dying when death is not needed, when lesser means of heroism would suffice, is not loving. It is, as Erickson states, plain foolishness.

Moral influence theory asks us to look upon Christ's death as an act of love, which it surely was. But absent the backdrop of penal substitution, Bushnell and similarly minded thinkers sap Christ's sacrifice of its loving nature. Rather than establishing Jesus as the ultimate practical demonstration of God's love for us, they unwittingly depict him as a divine fool who would proverbially jump on a grenade even if there is plenty of time for everyone to escape to outside the blast zone.

Do All Religions Refer to the Same Objective Reality? Evaluating John Hick's Pluralism

Jesus Christ declared "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."⁶³ In so doing, he established the fundamental Christian claim to exclusivity. Jesus' path is the only way to God. All other paths are false. Against this exclusive outlook, however, stand increasing attempts to harmonize the various religious systems of the world.

⁶¹ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 749.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ John 14:6 (NIV).

This religious pluralism, according to Vince Vitale, is based upon “the false assumption that all, or at least many of, the major ways of seeing the world are fundamentally in agreement.”⁶⁴

Pluralism comes in many forms. Most inevitably end up elevating the importance of one worldview above others, even when they claim to accept all belief systems. However, John Hick believes it is possible to find harmony among all the major world religions while keeping them on equal footing.

First, Hick argues that all religions are, in their own way, referring to the same ultimate reality.

My reason to assume that the different world religions are referring, through their specific concepts of the Gods and Absolutes, to the same ultimate reality is the striking similarity of the transformed human state described within the different traditions as saved, redeemed, enlightened, wise, awakened, liberated. This similarity strongly suggests a common source of salvific transformation.⁶⁵

In other words, viewing the goal of religion as that of transforming people into becoming more moral, wise, noble, etc., Hick claims that all religions accomplish this with roughly equal degrees of success. Therefore, they must all be pointing to the same common reality but doing so through a culturally conditioned lens.

Harold Netland summarizes Hick’s view as follows.

At the heart of his model are three claims: (1) that there is an ultimate reality to which the different religions are legitimate responses, (2) that the various religions are historically and culturally conditioned interpretations of this reality, and (3) that soteriological transformation is occurring roughly to the same extent within the major religions. Therefore, the various religions are to be affirmed as

⁶⁴ Ravi Zacharias & Vince Vitale, *Jesus Among Secular Gods: The Countercultural Claims of Christ* (New York: Faith Words, 2017), 95.

⁶⁵ John Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions: The Rainbow of Faiths* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 69.

equally legitimate religious alternatives, with preferences among them largely being functions of individual characteristics and social and cultural factors.⁶⁶

Hick calls this universal reality “the Real.” As described by Douglas Groothuis, the Real “signifies the ultimate reality that is the source of the diverse manifestations of the major world religions.”⁶⁷ While it has its own objective existence, it is impossible to arrive at any objective knowledge of it. This is because all such knowledge could only come to us through religious experience, but our experiences are necessarily culturally conditioned, meaning they may point us toward different or even contradictory conclusions. Therefore, according to Hick, people may in fact have experiences of the Real, but those experiences cannot be said to produce objective knowledge of it.⁶⁸ Hick thereby believes he has provided legitimacy to all forms of religious experience while also explaining why their objective truth claims may differ. However, upon examination it is clear that Hick has failed in his goal.

First, the claim that it is impossible to have objective knowledge of the Real is itself a statement of alleged objective knowledge about the Real. Hick’s claim is self-defeating, similar to stating “it is true that there is no such thing as truth.” In the very act of uttering the statement, its proponent has implicitly denied that which he is seeking to affirm. Hick’s self-contradiction is also apparent in his discussion of ineffability. He claims the Real is ineffable and states, “By ‘ineffable’ I mean ... having a nature that is beyond the scope of our networks of human concepts. Thus the Real in itself cannot properly be said to be personal or impersonal, purposive

⁶⁶ Harold Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith & Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2001), 221.

⁶⁷ Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, 579.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

or non-purposive, good or evil, substance or process, even one or many.”⁶⁹ But as Netland points out

to claim that literally none of the properties we can conceptualize apply to the Real is self-referentially incoherent. If this were the case, then at the very least “the property of being totally beyond all conceptual and linguistic categories” would apply to the Real, thereby refuting the original claim.⁷⁰

Hick repeatedly ascribes attributes to the Real, all while trying to deny that any attributes can accurately describe it. His view is, at its core, incoherent.

Second, Hick does not truly find harmony at all. Instead, he reduces the claims of various worldviews to such general platitudes that any commonality he claims to find is essentially meaningless. Netland responds that Hick

claims to discern a common soteriological structure within the great religions – “the transformation of our human situation from a state of alienation from the true structure of reality to a radically better state in harmony with reality,” or “the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness.” ... But as it stands, this is merely a formal expression lacking specific content, and each religious tradition would provide strikingly different meanings to this formula.⁷¹

Further, the reductionistic versions that Hick creates would be unrecognizable and highly objectionable to adherents of a religion. Netland correctly observes that Hick “freely reinterprets troublesome doctrines so as to accommodate them within his theory.”⁷² If Hick claims to be describing religion X, but orthodox adherents of religion X cannot even recognize the faith he is describing, then he is not truly describing religion X at all.

⁶⁹ Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions*, 27.

⁷⁰ Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism*, 243.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 236.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 232.

Third, Hick claims that all religions transform people into a morally better state at roughly equal rates. However, this statement, even if true, presupposes the existence of a transcendent moral standard by which to judge whether such a transformation is “good” or “bad.” We cannot know that someone has been transformed for the better unless there is some moral standard to which we can compare their states both before and after the transformation and see that they are moving closer to that standard of “goodness.” As Stuart C. Hackett states, “if there were no intrinsic moral worth in the objective sense, then there would be no reasonable standard for evaluating preferences themselves.”⁷³ However, many of the religious systems that Hick seeks to harmonize deny the existence of such a transcendent standard.⁷⁴

Further, Hackett argues that this objective moral standard must be personal.

...since every case of recognized moral obligation within actual human moral experience may plausibly be interpreted as involving the responsibility on the part of a person or persons to some person or persons as object of that responsibility – and since the transcendent good is the ultimate ground and object of all moral responsibility, even to finite persons – then it is reasonable to conclude that the transcendent good itself is, by this analogy with human moral experience, itself personal.⁷⁵

This again runs directly counter to the foundational beliefs of many of the worldviews Hick attempts to bring together. While Hick claims that the Real cannot be thought of as either personal or impersonal, his entire argument is built upon a foundation that must assume that the

⁷³ Stuart C. Hackett, “The Value Dimension of the Cosmos: A Moral Argument,” in *Philosophy of Religion: A Reader and Guide*, ed. William Lane Craig (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 151.

⁷⁴ At least this is what they state explicitly. In practice, all people will implicitly assume the existence of an objective moral standard, even if they deny such a standard in their outward declarations.

⁷⁵ Hackett, “The Value Dimension of the Cosmos: A Moral Argument,” 152.

ultimate moral reality is personal. Hick seeks to deny that which he must first implicitly assume to be true.

Conclusion

An accurate theological understanding of God's revelation is an essential foundation for apologetics. After all, if apologetics is the defense of the Christian faith, the apologist must first know what it is she is defending. It is of no use attempting to defend a proposition that is contrary to reality as revealed by God. The supportive relationship between theology and apologetics can be seen in response to any number of challenges to orthodox Christianity. However, the above five examples demonstrate the point.

First, scholars such as Jerry A. Coyne or Stephen Jay Gould have claimed some level of incompatibility between the realms of science and faith. Their stance, though, fails to appreciate the necessary presuppositions upon which all scientific inquiry is based. The biblical doctrine of creation shows not only that science and faith may peaceably coexist, but that Christianity provides the grounding for the necessary presuppositions of science.

Second, a branch of Pentecostalism known as Oneness Theology, a modern variation of modalistic monarchianism, denies that God's nature is trinitarian. Rather, they urge that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are different modes by which God manifests himself. However, this view fails to adequately account for the biblical data, including references to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit all being present and acting simultaneously, the use of personal pronouns between them, and the repeated use of both the singular and plural to describe God.

Third, some scholars such as Bart Ehrman claim the New Testament speaks of an adoptionist Christology, by which Jesus was an ordinary man who at some point during his life

was “adopted” by God and granted a higher status (albeit still below that of God). However, Ehrman starts by assuming his desired conclusion and tries to force the biblical evidence to fit within his preconceived framework, ignoring large swaths of Scripture that run counter to his argument along the way.

Fourth, Horace Bushnell seeks to minimize or even remove any penal substitutionary elements from the atonement, suggesting moral influence as the primary purpose of Christ’s sacrifice. While there is some truth in Bushnell’s arguments, the moral influence of Jesus’ actions only make sense in the context of a penal substitution in which he took on a punishment that we deserved.

Fifth, John Hick seeks to harmonize all major world religions within his pluralistic framework. He claims that all faiths refer to the same universal reality, but through their unique cultural lens. In seeking to define all religions as pointing to this universal reality (i.e., “the Real”), Hick ends up *re*-defining those religions such that they bear little to know resemblance to the faith practiced by orthodox adherents. Further, his entire system is built upon a self-refuting foundation.

In order to respond to these false views, an apologist must first understand correct, sound theology. One cannot know a line is crooked until he has a sense of what it means to be straight. God, in his special revelation, has provided us a plumb line by which to measure truth claims. Attempting to evaluate views, however, without first carefully examining the standard by which they are to be tested is akin to embarking on a cross country trip without having any idea which direction to turn at even the first intersection. It will inevitably result in getting lost along the way.

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