

ABSTRACT

APOLOGETICS BEYOND ARGUMENTS: AN ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION OF THE APOLOGETIC METHODS OF RICHARD SWINBURNE, ALISTER MCGRATH, AND STANLEY HAUERWAS

BY EMIL BØRTY NIELSEN

This thesis seeks to contribute to the academic study of Christian apologetics by formulating a meta-apologetic framework in which the following question of apologetic methodology can be answered: how should Christians seek to persuade others to have faith in the Christian God? The question is answered by an analysis and assessment of three apologetic methods: the argumentative apologetics of philosopher Richard Swinburne, the imaginative apologetics of theologian Alister McGrath, and the communitarian apologetics of theologian Stanley Hauerwas.

The thesis consists of ten chapters. The first chapter presents and justifies the choice of method and material. The second chapter contains a meta-apologetic exploration and discussion of the nature and aim of apologetics. Based on this discussion apologetics is defined as follows: apologetics is a practice, where Christians seek to persuade others to have faith in the Christian God. This meta-apologetic definition is called holistic apologetics and is distinct from what is called doxastic apologetics, which focuses on arguments and beliefs, and epistemic apologetics, which focuses on how the Christian faith can be justified. Following the meta-apologetic discussion is a survey of how various scholars have classified apologetic methods. The classification of theologian Kevin Vanhoozer is chosen as a framework for the thesis. He identifies three types of apologetic methods, which I name argumentative, imaginative, and communitarian apologetics.

Chapters three to five contain a reconstruction of the apologetic methods of the three chosen scholars. In chapter three, Swinburne presents a theory of apologetics based solely on arguments. He bases this approach on a strong conception of reason, that is, he claims Christianity is more probable than its alternatives and this can be recognized by most people if they are presented with the arguments.

In chapter four, McGrath presents his combinatory theory of apologetics. Like Swinburne, he commends an argumentative apologetic approach although his conception of reason is more moderate. Further, he commends an imaginative approach, which focuses on how images and narratives can reveal Christianity as an attractive and meaningful interpretation of human existence.

In chapter five, Hauerwas presents a communitarian apologetic, which focuses on Christian faithfulness. Christians must embody the story of Christ in their lives. A life thus transformed is inherently attractive since it radiates the goodness of God. It thus draws people into the Christian community. Hauerwas's apologetics is also combinatorial in the sense, that he does not completely reject the relevance of arguments. but he assigns them a very small role partly because he has a weak conception of reason.

Chapters six to nine discuss apologetic methodology and seek to identify the best apologetic method. Three criteria are used in identifying the best method: morality, coherence, and efficiency. Each of chapters seven to nine is devoted to one of these criteria. Chapter six forms an introduction to the discussion. The three methods are compared and a framework for distinguishing between four levels of apologetic discourse is presented.

Chapter seven assesses the morality of the apologetic methods by formulating an ethic of apologetics. The main criterion of moral apologetics is the criterion of interest. Apologetic communication should thus further the interest of the interlocutor. This criterion is applied to the three methods. It is concluded, that a combinatorial approach to apologetics is potentially most in the interest of the interlocutor.

Chapter eight assesses the coherence of apologetics. The following objection is discussed: does apologetics rest on an incoherent conception of rationality and language? The objection is rejected since it misses the apologetic theories of the chosen scholars.

Chapter nine assesses the efficiency of apologetics. Two objections to the efficiency of apologetics are discussed and rejected. First, can arguments create faith? It is concluded that arguments can influence faith but also that it is inefficient as a means. The latter point is followed by an exploration into the nature of emotions and how humans are influenced. It is concluded that arguments are inefficient compared to imaginative and communitarian means. Second, it is objected that only the Holy Spirit can create faith. This objection is rejected on the basis, that we are dealing with two levels of discourse. The conflict is thus only apparent. Chapter ten concludes the thesis. It is concluded, that the best apologetic method is a combination of argumentative and non-argumentative approaches to apologetics.