

# Summary of *The Rebirth of Apologetics*

Avery R. Cardinal Dulles, S.J.  
*First Things*, May 2004

<http://www.firstthings.com/article/2008/08/the-rebirth-of-apologetics--11>

As various books in the ACC Diocese of the South's apologetics curriculum have discussed, the entire subject of apologetics fell into strong disfavor in the academic world during the last couple of centuries. Many committed Christians became convinced that they should not try to defend their faith, and certainly not try to persuade others to convert to Christianity.

How did we reach this shocking situation? Cardinal Dulles explores that question and what to do about it in this article from the conservative journal *First Things*.

Cardinal Dulles begins by explaining the proper relationship between faith and reason in Christian revelation. He believes that reason can take us much of the way to the truth, but we must have faith in God to reach the rest of the way. As he phrased it, "Reinforcing reason, faith enables it to transcend its normal limits." (*par. 1*) The task of apologetics is to help others believe the evidence of reason so they may have faith.

Next, the article examines the goals of Christian apologetics through the centuries. In the early centuries, the goal was to survive attacks from the authorities and hostile skeptics. Once the religion's survival was assured, the next goal was to convince the Jews, Moslems, Greek philosophers, and others that their belief systems were wrong or transcended.

In the last 500 years, the focus has shifted to defending Christianity from rationalism and humanism. In the 19th and 20th centuries, the primary opponents were believers in the scientific method who regarded Christianity as little more than naive superstition. This attitude became so prevalent that Christians were expected to cease their defense of the faith in the name of tolerance and diversity.

Cardinal Dulles then gives his reasons for the collapse of apologetics.

\* Apologetics tried to prove the entire truth of the Christian religion rather than lead the nonbelievers to the point of faith. Worse, apologists were accused of manipulating evidence to prove their arguments.

\* Some apologists watered down the essentials of the faith to make it more palatable to rationalists and humanists. Jesus became a "sublime ethical teacher" (*par. 10*) instead of the Son of God.

\*Apologists tried to de-emphasize the role of God's grace in accepting Christianity. They claimed that man could find God without God's help by reason alone.

\* The secular culture informed Christians that they offended non-Christians when they defended Christianity. Cardinal Dulles responds that if we do not believe that Christianity is important enough to defend, we will soon stop believing it at all.

Cardinal Dulles notes with approval that many Christian intellectuals have seen the truth of the last point and are leading a new wave of apologetics. He mentions names from the curriculum like Peter Kreeft and Paul Griffiths. He even applauds the efforts of the cable television network EWTN and Mother Angelica.

The second part of the article concentrates on the best approach to apologetics in the modern world. Cardinal Dulles believes that the classical reason-based methods of the past will not work with today's atheists and agnostics. How do we reach them?

He agrees with Pope John Paul II that the best approach is through interpersonal testimony. We must tell others why we believe. This is what the Apostles did in their preaching.

The word "testimony" may be sensitive to those of us who grew up in an Evangelical background since it calls up memories of fervent shouting and Red Guard-like pressure to testify during services. To his credit, Cardinal Dulles does not suggest that we all turn into street preachers.

The article next lists various tests that can be used to verify the truth of Christian testimony, especially the type found in the Bible.

\* The New Testament Apostles were very close to the original events described in the Gospels and epistles, if not actual participants.

\* Different sources give essentially the same testimony.

\* The message must have been of divine origin since it was not the kind of message that would have come from human beings.

\* The messengers were transformed from timid laborers to powerful speakers willing to risk their lives to proclaim the message.

\* The message was important enough to be revealed through supernatural means.

Cardinal Dulles finally calls for more modern apologists to quit being so hung up on proving the truth of Christianity through rational arguments and rely more on

personal testimony. This, he believes, is how we will spread the Word of God to a world that badly needs to hear it.