

Summary of *A History of Apologetics*

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As soon as the Holy Ghost descended upon the original apostles at Pentecost, they began to preach the Good News about Jesus Christ and His saving grace. From their starting point in Jerusalem, they spread out across the world of their time to deliver this news. Legend says that St. Thomas the Doubter reached as far as India. St. Bartholemew and St. Thaddeus reached Armenia, according to the modern Armenian church.

Ever since that day of wind and fire, Christians have been defending their faith from unbelievers and enemies. This volume briefly tells the story of how they did it.

Cardinal Dulles, the son of the famous Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, does not attempt to cover the entire history. He focuses on those writers who argued for general Christianity as opposed to one denomination or another. He also omits arguments supporting specific Christian doctrines such as the Virgin Birth or Real Presence.

The book begins its historical survey by starting with the texts of the New Testament. The Gospels and Epistles are not exactly apologetic literature; the Gospels are closer to a historical narrative of Jesus's ministry, though with much added theological material in John's Gospel. However, the Epistles and Acts contain illustrations of how the early preachers argued for the truth of Christianity.

To a large degree, even the earliest sermons demonstrated how existing Old Testament passages foreshadowed Christ. Many of these passages were found in Psalms like 2 and 118, as well as the "Suffering Servant" sections of Isaiah which are used as lesson texts in Advent.

The first apologists had to deal with some very serious objections from the Jews, especially concerning the Crucifixion. The Sanhedrin had convicted Jesus of blasphemy and ordered his execution. How could Jesus be the Jewish Messiah? As we now know, most Jews never accepted the Christian arguments and remained separate from the faith.

The Acts of the Apostles gives many portraits of the early apologists at work. Chapter 7 shows St. Stephen telling the Jews why they do not understand Christianity, then being stoned for his trouble. In Chapter 14, the Lystrans mistake Paul for Zeus after

Paul heals a cripple. Paul attempts to correct their error. Later, Paul speaks to the Athenians at the Aeropagus in Chapter 17. The learned, sophisticated Greeks thought they had heard it all. They listened, at least until Paul began talking about the Resurrection. Then they tuned him out.

Cardinal Dulles notes a shift in the focus of Christian writing around A.D. 125. Before that point, most of the authors were addressing themselves to other Christians to instruct them of the history and doctrine of the faith. After this time, the writers began to aim their messages more at the outside world.

These writers had pressing problems to deal with. Various groups either distrusted or hated Christians in the early centuries. Civil authorities wondered if the Christians worshipped the Roman gods. If they did not, this amounted to treason against the Emperor. Passionate Jews considered the new religion to be the worst possible insult to Judaism. Pagan philosophers worried that Christianity would kill their long-held belief systems.

In this period we find apologists like Justin Martyr, who wrote tracts aimed at both the Emperors and the Jews. We also see Athenagoras of Athens, who answers charges of cannibalism by pointing out the strict ethical behavior of Christians.

Tertullian's *Apology* from the end of the second century uses Roman legal principles to defend Christians and the faith. In the third century, we discover Clement of Alexandria and his *Protrepticus*. Clement shows how Greek intellectual achievements find their fulfillment in Jesus. Also in the Alexandrian school is Origen, who wrote treatises answering charges from defenders of Hellenic philosophy. Many other apologists are cited, including Athanasius and John Chryostom.

Augustine of Hippo stands as one of the pillars of apologetics. Cardinal Dulles devotes many pages to analyzing Augustine's apologetic arguments. It would require many pages to present all of the material, but one point is worth making. In the Confessions, Augustine seems to believe that the best proof for the existence of Christianity is the abnormally moral behavior of its believers, at least by the standards of the times.

After Augustine, the Church moved into the centuries that we know today as the Dark Ages and the Middle Ages. This period, though quite long, was not as backward and unproductive as we like to think. The focus of intellectual activity moved to the Arab/Moslem world. Those scholars preserved much of the Greco-Roman heritage which the West might have lost. They gave that heritage back to us when we were ready to receive it.

Much apologetic effort during this time was aimed at the Moslems and Jews. We hear John Damascene writing to the former and Peter Damian evangelizing to the latter. Other thinkers like Anselm, 11th century Archbishop of Canterbury, aided the cause by exploring the relationship between faith and reason.

Late in the Middle Ages, the Arab academics like Averroës began the task mentioned earlier of reintroducing Greek philosophy into Europe. Along with the failure of the Crusades against Islam, the Christian world began to experience a crisis of confidence. Thomas Aquinas provided an answer to these questions with his *Summa Theologica*. His major apologetic work was the *Summa contra gentiles*. Aquinas tried to prove that reason could support much of Christian belief, even if faith were still necessary to understand it all. He accepts that miracles can be used to help prove the correctness of the faith.

Aquinas, as highly as his work was regarded, did not persuade all Christian philosophers that faith was required. Many of the Scholastics who followed him continued to insist that everything Christian could be understood and proved by reason. John Duns Scotus listed ten reasons to believe in Holy Scripture which emphasized reason. (pg. 129) The reasons included:

- The Scripture writers' claims to speak in the name of God.
- Scriptural prophecies being fulfilled.
- The unity of Scripture contrasted with the disagreements of philosophers.

The next great movement of Christian thought concerned the Protestant Reformation. This was aimed at the Church itself and not at unbelievers, so it was not truly an apologetic movement. Neither Luther nor Calvin worked primarily as apologists, but aimed their cannons at the Roman assumption of primacy in spiritual matters.

After the Reformation and up to the current time, the most pressing issue facing apologists became the rise in unbelief in any religion. This unbelief is often replaced by a belief in science or humanism. Cardinal Dulles devotes the second half of his book to reviewing these apologetic ideas, from Locke, Paley, Leibniz, Schleiermacher, and Newman to modern but very different apologists like C. S. Lewis and Hans Küng. Other writers who have tried to defend Christianity against the rationalists, atheists, and agnostics include G. K. Chesterton, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, T. S. Eliot, Dorothy Sayers, and Karol Wojtyła (Pope John Paul II).

It is worth noting that the author applies his critical judgment to the apologists who are reviewed in these pages. Cardinal Dulles finds many of them unconvincing or that their arguments have been weakened by later scholarship. He seems to save his

highest regard for Augustine and Aquinas, with Lewis in an important but lesser position. As an example, he criticizes John Henry Newman, one of the most important theologians of the last 200 years, as "a man of his time," too introspective for today's world, and too respectful of the Victorian social norms.

In general, this volume contributes greatly to the understanding of the field of apologetics. However, the first half of the book (to 1800) is probably more successful than the second half and more worthy of study. If time is short, focus on the earlier sections.