

Summary of *An Apology for Apologetics*

Paul J. Griffiths

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It sounds absurd on its face. Why in the name of Heaven should anyone feel the need to apologize for defending a religious faith? Yet by the second half of the 20th century, the Western academic world had reached the point where advocating for Christianity was as unacceptable as passing gas in a public space. How quaint! How barbaric! How intolerant! And yet such defensiveness has not yet reached the universities of the Moslem world.

Defense for the defense of Christianity has come from an unlikely source. Dr. Griffiths wrote the book while a professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago. He is now teaching at Duke University. He also converted from Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism. Earlier in his career he focused on studies in Buddhism, but has mostly given up that pursuit.

The author has composed a text whose primary assertion is that all religions, specifically including Christianity, should argue for the truth of their beliefs. He refers to this position as the "necessity of interreligious apologetics (NOIA)."

Dr. Griffiths admits that the NOIA principle "offends... against many (perhaps most) of the theological orthodoxies of our time..." (*pg. 1*) He admits that today an apologist is considered almost a racist, (*pg. 2*) and that the discipline is not often found in the curricula of most American seminaries at the time of writing. Nonetheless, he asserts that apologetics still has a place in religious debate. He would even assert that the apologist has the duty to criticize the claims of other religions.

Being an academic, Dr. Griffiths cannot say anything simply. If he could, his 107-page book would have run less than half that length. He must use a large amount of jargon to bolster his arguments. One full chapter discusses "The Properties of Doctrine-Expressing Sentences." (*pg. 19*) A doctrine-expressing sentence is a religious belief. Another subsection is titled "Esotericist Perspectivalism." (*pg. 51*)

To become a doctrine-expressing sentence, the proposition must have three attributes: (*pg. 19*)

- It must be understandable by people who believe in other religions.
- It must make claims outside the originating religion.

- It must evaluate to true or false.

In fairness to Dr. Griffiths, the need for the first point is not as silly as it sounds. Many modern academics would argue that no culture can ever truly understand another culture's beliefs and ideals. Therefore, any mutual understanding is impossible. Because of the popularity of this thesis, Dr. Griffiths must spend a few pages defending his requirement for intelligibility. He must also argue against the deconstructionists like Jacques Derrida who would rob all language of most of its meaning.

Even concepts like truth and falsehood can cause controversy in this rarefied air. Dr. Griffiths shudders in horror at the cultural atrocities committed by Westerners during the colonial period because the Westerners thought they knew more than the people who were being colonized. (*pg. 34*) He refers to the view in the theological world that this amounts to "intellectual terrorism." (*pg. 35*) It is true that many valid cultures were exposed to opposing views during colonization periods, but one wonders if the intellectual debate rose to the level of oppression or terrorism.

The next chapter deals with the possibility that some doctrine-expressing sentences may not be true. As crazy as this sounds, one of today's popular beliefs in the intellectual world is that all religious belief is equally true. There is no reason to believe one religion over another. All paths lead to the truth. This is called "universalist perspectivalism." (*pg. 46*) The end result of such thinking is either a belief in no religion at all or a single "world religion" with many different expressions in the world's major religions.

Dr. Griffiths notes (*pg. 48-9*) that when taken to the extreme, this position leads to accepting as true the beliefs of religious people like the members of the Jonestown cult or the Nazis. How do we declare any beliefs to be wrong, even when they cause such horrible results?

In the following chapter, Dr. Griffiths answers the argument that no religion can be allowed to state its reasons for belief since any argument will offend others. Even the current Dalai Lama believes that it is best to avoid offense, even if he knows he is right. (*pg. 61*) Why cause trouble? No need to set the feathers flying.

Another criticism of apologetics is that it is almost impossible to persuade others of the truths of your arguments. Dr. Griffiths claims that this belief is found more often among Reformed Christians and Calvinists than other Christians. Yes, many people find it difficult to change their minds about much of anything. Fortunately, he rejects this position when carried to the extreme of rejecting apologetics.

His next chapter sets conditions for the proper conduct of apologetics. Being a proper liberal, he recoils from any situation where religious apologetics is used as a tool for one people to oppress another. So much for saving the unbelievers. And no appeals to religious texts like the Bible or Qur'an are allowed since the works are only recognized within a single religion. That prohibition actually makes some sense.

The final chapter uses Buddhist and Christian apologetic arguments to show how such apologetics should be conducted. The arguments concentrate on how both religions deal with the concept of a person or a soul. Dr. Griffiths analyzes the arguments to determine if they meet his standards. He finally concludes that much more argument could be conducted on this question.

The author clearly believed that these arguments had to be presented in a bloated and jargon-filled philosophical style to be taken at all seriously by the modern intellectual world. This sad fact tells us how bad a shape the intellectual world is in. We know that Derrida and his followers are very popular nowadays. As a sign of the author's writing style, this is the kind of book that uses a (probably) Sanskrit religious text untranslated as a preface. Did Dr. Griffiths truly expect us to be able to understand it, or was he just showing off?

The author has made a solid case for why religious apologetics are valid and important. Why the case needed to be made is a more interesting question. If you need to read the book, it will not take too much time. Otherwise, you can assume that it is proper to defend your beliefs and use your time for more important pursuits.