

Summary of *Handbook of Catholic Apologetics*

Peter J. Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli, S.J.

San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994

The authors are professors of philosophy at Boston College. They clearly accept basic Roman Catholic Christianity and vigorously defend it, which is a refreshing change of pace from most modern academics. In fact, they have no use for the theology professors who try to kill their students' belief in Christianity; they pointedly refer to Jesus's damnation of such heretics.

The volume starts by defending the need for apologetics from the people who claim that any defense of Christianity is bigoted, mean-spirited, and hateful. Such opinions can be heard all over the intellectual world in these times. The authors illustrate how faith and reason can work together. They justify the need for their book by pointing out the dire situation facing Christianity in modern Western society, which is largely moving towards a rejection of Christian beliefs.

The next section of the book discusses God and the reasons to believe in Him. One chapter discusses twenty arguments for the existence of God. We read about the argument from degrees of perfection, which claims that if one thing is better than another, there must be a Best. The argument from cause claims that if one thing causes another, there must be an Uncaused Being to serve as the ultimate cause of everything else. I am partial to the argument from design, which simply states that a universe so intricately connected to itself could not possibly have just happened by chance as the evolutionists claim. The last argument is Pascal's Wager, in which the French philosopher figures he might as well believe because he has everything to gain for believing and nothing to lose if he is wrong.

After the "existence of God" arguments come sections about the nature of God and how He interacts with His creation. Some doubters spend much time working up paradoxical situations where God cannot do certain things (for example, commit evil) even though He is supposed to be omnipotent. The authors would respond that God allows evil to exist even though He does not do it. Therefore, this is a demonstration of God's omnipotence instead of His limitations.

Next the authors look at Jesus Christ. They present arguments in favor of Christ's existence and divinity. Certainly, as they say, "The divinity of Christ is the most

distinctively Christian doctrine of all." (*pg. 159*) They argue that Jesus acted in ways that only a divine creature would:

- Calling himself the "Son of God."
- Performing miracles.
- Changing the name of Jews (Simon to Peter).
- Telling the world that He could save them from Hell.

Dr. Kreeft and Fr. Tacelli are bold to say the essential error of many modern "believers": "The essential modernist revision is to see Christ simply as the ideal man ... but not God in the flesh." (*pg. 160*) They also remind us that we should expect nonbelievers to object strongly to Jesus's claims because they sound scandalous and absurd. It is easy for believers to forget this.

"If Jesus is not God, what is He?" (*pg. 106*) Five possible answers are given; four are rejected and one accepted with arguments in support:

- Liar
- Lunatic
- Guru
- Myth (popular among academics)
- Lord

When we discuss Jesus, at some point we must deal with the most improbable event in human history: the Resurrection. The book reviews the implications of this event and the reasons why it must have happened. It then discusses various aspects of the Resurrection, including the kind of body Jesus had after the Resurrection (do ghosts eat food?). Harsh criticism is heaped on the moderns who look upon the Resurrection as just another part of the Christian myth.

The book then spends a few pages breaking down the reasons why the Resurrection story and the Gospels in general must be true. This section summarizes C. S. Lewis's powerful argument that the Gospels are totally unlike any other literature of the time and culture. One other important argument points out that the first witnesses to the Resurrection were women. Why would the author of a myth use women of inferior social status to vouch for the truth of his main argument?

Then the volume moves to a review of the Bible. The authors are equally critical of fundamentalists who insist that all Christian beliefs must be proven from Holy Scripture as of modern academics who refuse to believe in the truth of any Christian writing because modern literary analysis has proven such writing to be inaccurate.

One section heading gives a good measure of the properly balanced approach to Bible study: "Know when to interpret the Bible literally versus symbolically."

The latter part of the book discusses topics related to Christianity like life after death, Heaven, Hell, salvation, and Christianity's relation to other religions. The chapter on Hell is especially useful to the apologist. It summarizes the main objections to Hell (God of wrath and proof that God is not omnipotent, among others) and offers arguments against the objections.

One part of the last chapter will irritate Anglican readers. All of the arguments in the preceding chapters apply equally well to at least all "sacramental" Christians (Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans, and perhaps a few others). But the final chapter offers arguments for specific Roman Catholic doctrines.

The book tells Anglicans that they have broken from the true faith and rejected apostolic succession. (*pg. 429-30*) Anglicans would respond that we never rejected apostolic succession. We only rejected the Roman claim that they are the only valid source. We received our succession from Scottish bishops who received it just as validly as any Roman bishop. Therefore, I must reject this one section of the book. Fortunately, this one problem does not invalidate the rest of the book.

Dr. Kreeft and Fr. Tacelli claim that they wrote this manual because there was no single book on the market aimed at the current-day student that offered the apologetic position for Christianity. They were probably correct in this assertion. A great deal of theological writing over the centuries is difficult for the 21st century reader to wade through. It tends to be flowery and dense, turbid and turgid. These writers were more interested in the depth and beauty of their arguments than the clarity.

Modern readers want all prose to read like Hemingway as opposed to, say, the current Tom Wolfe. We want bullet points instead of long paragraphs. Reading old theology texts can be like swimming in oatmeal.

It was time for an apologetic text for today; this book handles the job very well. The chapters are broken into short sections which the modern mind can comprehend. Sufficient humor helps the digestion, including references to New England sports teams and lawyer jokes. More importantly, the authors have summarized twenty centuries of apologetics to produce a book that any Christian can use to defend the faith.

Anyone who wishes to defend the Catholic faith would be well advised to read this valuable addition to the apologetic canon. Of the books that I have read so far, this is

the one volume that I recommend to anyone who wants to understand Christian apologetics.