

Oponentský posudek k disertační práci

„The Nature and Identity of Apologetics in Light of the Calls of Scripture and the Second Vatican Council“

Autor: Stuart Nicolson M.A.

Vedoucí práce: prof. Tomáš Machula Ph.D., Th.D.

Mr. Stuart Nicolson's dissertation focuses on the field of apologetics. He is close to a certain kind of Anglo-Saxon apologetics, nowadays disseminated mainly on the Internet, which has a popularizing character: "apologetical content needs to be developed for all intelligence and social abilities levels." (p. 261) He connected it with the passage from 1 Peter 3:15b-16a and from there he both chose the title "Petrine apologetics" for it and also schematized it into three "steps" using the biblical place in question: preparation, response, in the Christian way. More than the content of the apologetics, the dissertation is about the formal description of the approach. In this way the student decided to anchor his apologetics in the Scriptures and in the history of the Church, and the work thus represents a kind of hermeneutics of Scripture and tradition according to the chosen key of "Petrine apologetics". The student summarizes the focus of his work as follows: "This study seeks to show that recognising and returning to a Petrine understanding of apologetics is timely and even needed. The postmodern milieu offers rich opportunities for apologetical engagement and this requires preparation of the faithful in order to fulfil the calls of Scripture and the Second Vatican Council." (p. 12)

The student places apologetics in proximity to evangelism and catechesis (section 4.4). He also writes about education – of both Christians and those interested in faith (or its opponents), so we could include religious pedagogy (the student does not use the term). The term mission appears, though not often. However, assigning the work to a theological discipline is complicated, as will be shown. The student deliberately conceives of his work as a polemic with academic theology and its disciplines.

In the overall layout, the dissertation is logically and clearly structured. In the first part, the student connects his conception of apologetics to selected New Testament letters and to several places in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. In the second extensive part, consisting of four subchapters, he uses his concept of apologetics to compare successively other New Testament writings, the works of the Apostolic and anti-Gnostic Fathers, other Church Fathers and the first ecumenical councils, then selected figures of Western medieval theology and some contemporary councils, up to the period of the Reformation, and finally selected figures of the 19th and 20th centuries up to the Second Vatican Council. The third part deals with apologetics before, during and after the Second Vatican Council. The final fourth section argues for the necessity of the so-called New Apologetics, describes its elements, and introduces some of its North American proponents.

The scope of the second part exceeds all the other parts in their sum. Thus, although it does not belong to the centre of gravity of the thesis, its significance within the overall work should be acknowledged.

Among the best passages of the dissertation are those in which the student presents good examples of recent and contemporary apologetics in a non-polemical way. It would have made good sense to me if he had based his conception of apologetics on a much more thorough presentation of four inspirational figures of the early 20th century: Chesterton, Sheed, Knox, and Sheen (section 2d.4). Alternatively, he could focus more broadly on an

analysis of the work of the New Apologetics representatives Levada, Barron and Kreeft. For this or that group of apologists, he could examine not only the formal procedures of their work, but also their specific themes, and show which themes of apologetics persist and which ones must be added, given the cultural context, or which ones can be left aside. He himself repeatedly reminds us that “Apologetics is a response” (e.g., p. 59), so it would be consistent to address what questions apologetics responds to.

I further divide my comments into two areas, but they cannot be strictly separated:

1. the persuasiveness of the thesis presented;
2. the standard of the academic work.

1.1 The student constitutively connects his concept of apologetics to 1 Peter 3:15-16. I am concerned whether this one biblical passage is somewhat overloaded, whether he does not put his own projections into it and whether he does not limit both apologetics and, above all, faith itself. First of all, the text lacks the reflection on hope that is actually mentioned in the letter (an apologetics of hope would be a beautiful topic!). A biblical exegesis of the text could remove many of my doubts – but the student resists this, and so there are concerns about whether he is working somewhat arbitrarily with the text. I see the aforementioned danger of overloading one place as a parallel to the principle of Reformation theology, which similarly relied on Paul’s proposition of justification by faith and read the rest of Scripture through its prism. If there is some reticence on the part of some Protestant theologians today to take this approach – and in the case of the doctrine of justification by faith this is undoubtedly a more theologically serious point than in the case of 1 Peter 3:15-16 – I would be even more concerned about a similar one-sidedness in the case of the Catholic letter of Peter.

1.2 In the student’s appeal: “It is important to return to the original definitions of apologetics ... we should reconsider the earliest evidence for apologetics as its purest” (p. 45) I see both a methodological problem, see the previous point, and a manifestation of a certain idealization of early Christianity as a golden age. This fact appears more in some Protestant theologies, where it is related to the concept of the Bible. Catholic theology, which reckons with the continuing action of the Holy Spirit in the living tradition of faith, might be more reticent about this idealization of a “pure origins” (see, for example, the Constitution *Dei Verbum* 8, Josef Zvěřina, *Teologie agapé I*).

1.3 In Church History the student makes a cut between Petrine and Justinian apologetics. This distinction seems legitimate to me insofar as it expresses a variety of styles, genres, and publics. I have misgivings about the naming of the two approaches (here in particular the work with 1 Peter 3:15-16 strikes me as somewhat violent, more on that later) and the generalizations the student associates with them. Under the label of “the Justinian way” the student can fit everything he considers harmful and distant. But doesn’t the expression then lose its explanatory value – and *mutatis mutandis* – its proposed counterpart “the Petrine way”? The terms certainly have no analytical value. What I find unacceptable is to mark one of the approaches with a plus sign and the other with a minus sign.

For inspiration on how to work differently, see, for example, David Tracy’s distinction between three forms according to the publics: systematic theology for the church, fundamental theology for the academy, and practical theology for society. Tracy sees legitimacy in the methods of all three types of theology (cf. *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*, 1981).

1.4 The effort to understand others that I encounter in apologetics is well demonstrated in Peter Abelard: “Realising that reaching out to Muslims required understanding them as well, Peter had important Islamic texts translated into Latin.” (p. 117) But what is the reason for this effort? The student quotes Dulles, who appreciates the attitude that “seeks to find as broad a common ground as possible with the non-Christian” (p. 117). Surprisingly, this is where the student sees the danger: “Rather than bending to accommodate others in apologetical dialogue, the apologist should be sufficiently prepared and always safeguard the integrity of the faith, never ‘bending the rules’ to please another: it is better to sow a seed of truth than to satisfy another’s preference.” (p. 118) The student’s concept of apologetics – though it wants to be in line with Christian ways and is sympathetic in its non-clerical nature – remains in the end very one-sided. The question arises, what kind of ethics, anthropology and ultimately theology is behind this one-sided conception? And isn’t the proclaimed Christian approach just a tactic to win the other? In fact, it can be said that it is the Christian approach that is essential in apologetics. That is, an attitude of openness to the other, an interest in what the other believes, in what he or she draws hope from.

On the level of the Church, synodal, mutual communication is now being thought through, even with the contribution of “those who do not belong to us”. How could this aspect enrich the concept of apologetics?

1.5 This is followed by the question whether the role of community is not somewhat neglected in the presented concept of apologetics. On p. 255 we read, “Barron ... shows the beauty of the Catholic Church in its buildings, traditions, stories, artwork, liturgy, etc.” Are people as living icons of Christ not lost behind the beauty of buildings and traditions? Is it not obscured in the somewhat technically outlined procedure of apologetics that it is authentic communication from people to people, and that the other is probably most addressed by the offer of relationship and only through it is the love of God known? (The section on community on p. 264ff does not add much to the point). One can speculate whether Western individualism (strongly criticized by Pope Francis) is not reflected in the concept. Could not the struggle for faith also include the struggle for the renewal of human communities, for example, as Pope Francis writes about fraternity and social friendship?

1.6 The problematic nature of the call for simplicity, practicality and unconcern with theology in the presented concept of apologetics is illustrated by a certain selective reading of the encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*. The student cites it on p. 220: “Honesty compels us to declare openly our conviction that the Christian religion is the one and only true religion, and it is our hope that it will be acknowledged as such by all who look for God and worship Him.” Pope Paul VI, however, writes about the relationship to other religions with respect and in a relatively balanced way for his time (as subsequently the declaration *Nostra Aetate*). It turns out that without a serious hermeneutical and theological grounding (biblical, fundamental and systematic theology), defenses of the faith can slip into false one-sidedness. Not to mention that theology has undergone a significant development since the Council in the area of its relationship to other religions, see the documents Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue, e.g. *Dialogue and Proclamation* 1991.

The proclaimed non-academicism is also related to the renunciation of the burden of method. The student quotes Kreeft on p. 259: “We [only] use standards of rationality and universally agreed principles of logic”. But is the agreement of these standards and principles valid? Does cultural and historical conditioning play a role in them? I believe that apologetics works with a certain method anyway, but unconsciously or covertly, and that it is part of honest thinking to try to reflect on the process and goals of the work.

1.7 The student appropriately calls for education on “why to believe” questions, not just “what to believe” (e.g., p. 107 and elsewhere). At the same time, he does not subject his question to criticism. Can the question be posed in this form to ancient and medieval Christians? Would it have made sense to them? Asked in this way, it is the question of the 21st century human being.

With respect to scholastic theology, it would be appropriate to connect the question on faith with the categories “fides quae creditor” and “fides qua creditor”. This distinction would also help the student in specifying the aims and ambitions of apologetics.

1.8 As much as firmness and stability belong to faith, I believe that to formulate an apologetic on overconfidence (“Stand your ground with firmness, like an anvil under the hammer. The mark of a true champion is to stand up to punishment and still come off victorious. ... Possibly useful for apologists now ...”. p. 74) can lead us to miss God’s address through another person’s (even a heretic’s) questions, doubts, or rebukes. Overconfidence in apologetics borders on godliness (cf. Gen. 3:5).

1.9 In the case of contemporary apologists, the student does not question the use of similarities and connections from culture (movies, sports, music). By analogy, it would have been helpful if he had noticed in the ancient Church the creative inculturation work of the Church Fathers, who interpreted the Greek myths in a biblical (especially Christological) key – in the manner of the Christian interpretation of the Old Testament. Greek myths formed the general religious consciousness of contemporary society and were naturally used in apologetics (see the work of H. Rahner 1945).

2.1 I believe that the student has been faced with a dilemma throughout the thesis, which he does not seem to fully reflect. The subject of his thesis is popular apologetics, which as such can do without theoretical apparatus, nor is it expected to. However, a dissertation on popular apologetics presented in a theological program must work with the theoretical theological apparatus. The student seems to be constantly oscillating between writing a scholarly thesis on apologetics and moving into apologetics itself. Specifically, this is manifested in his need to define himself against various theological disciplines and their scholarly work, against the development of theology, and against certain forms of academic work. Rather, I believe that this distracted the student from a more detailed examination of the topic of the thesis itself.

2.2 The delineation of student versus academic theology was also reflected in the type of resources used: “This study has regularly used sources that are of good quality, sometimes written by academics, but produced for readers with a good education rather than in academia. They differ in quality but many are at a good standard, supplying ordinary faithful with good apologetical preparation.” (p. 12) If the author wants to show that an apologetic of quality by his standards is contained in non-academic sources, he must be able to substantiate this with academic sources as part of his dissertation.

Although I haven’t found a JU regulation about the inadmissibility of using Wikipedia, many schools in the CR have done so since the undergraduate level. As a first signpost, Wikipedia is a good tool and the entries include a list of references used. As noted above, the student oscillates between reflecting on apologetics and writing apologetically – in the case of Wikipedia, while attempting to use it to demonstrate a way of reporting on certain topics in Christianity, sometimes slipping into simply quoting from Wikipedia without also basing the text on academic papers.

2.3 The student's treatment of the discipline of fundamental theology exhibits enormous simplifications, see e.g. the sentence: "It was replaced by fundamental theology, which is shown not to be connected to scriptural and conciliar defined apologetics." (p. 11-12) A look at the publications of post-conciliar fundamental theologians such as J. B. Metz, H. Fries, H. Waldenfels, D. Tracy, it can easily be shown that all these authors, of course, work with Scripture and the conciliar documents.

The FT principles presented by Tracy (p. 216) attempt to respond to the positions described by Balthasar: "Path between the Scylla of extrinsicism and the Charybdis of immanentisms." (p. 192) It is certainly legitimate to ask whether Tracy is not leaning too far to the side of immanentism. But the objections that the principles are not related to the Council and that they do not include the faithful are, I think, out of place. The student's concerns about the one-sidedness of the FT (p. 217) are legitimate and can always occur, but posed so broadly without reference to specific texts are difficult to answer.

Moreover, the student's criticism of fundamental theology for being too intellectual (e.g. p. 12) stands in contrast to St. Dominic's praise of the intellectual anchoring of the faith ("Being very well educated ... Dominic moved to establish his followers in universities", p. 128) and also to Robert Barron (e.g. the laudably quoted sentence: "My hope is that it helps to inaugurate a new era of intellectual vigor for the Church", p. 257).

Overall, I think the student distinguishes too sharply between FT and apologetics (p. 219). FT, after all, also works with what is given to us. But one comes to it in one's subjectivity. For faith remains a mystery, and the Church can at most accompany man on his journey to faith; the Church does not possess the mystery of God, but is at its service. Despite defining himself against rationalism, it seems to me that the student's conception of apologetics does not appreciate finding God in one's own heart ("Even if Christ is born a thousand times and is not born in your heart, his birth is in vain." Angelus Silesius). I also wonder to what extent does the student's conception of apologetics work with human freedom as a wonderful gift from God and a prerequisite for the possibility of faith? He certainly does not deny it, but does he take it seriously?

2.4 Similar to fundamental theology, the way a student treats biblical studies is completely unacceptable. He replaces scholarly work with a kind of apologetic biblicism driven by concerns and his own agenda (e.g., on pp. 19 and 43). If he really wanted to prove the connection between the decline of apologetics and critical biblical studies, he would have to base the discussion much more thoroughly on the scholarly literature. The whole discussion of Peter's and Paul's authorship seems to me superfluous for the purposes of the thesis. The presented material cannot be considered a research contribution.

I see as one manifestation of a certain spontaneous reading of the Bible an unreflected narrowing of the emphasis on the individual (typical of contemporary Western culture): "Peter's Call is that each individual develops ..." (p. 22). But the letter is addressed to the ecclesial community, so that the task of the defence is also put in the right order in this way.

As an example of reading the Bible according to one's agenda, one can see work with Jude 1:22 (p. 32), where the student works with translations based on the Septuagint and the Vulgate ("et hos quidem arguite iudicatos"), not with the more usual translations: in the first case he finds "convince", in the second he would find "have mercy".

In the case of the assumed sources (e.g. Q) it is not – in contrast to the student's views, which are often based on sources from the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – a cheap speculation, but a reconstruction of the process of the production of the text in an attempt to better understand it (cf. 43). Surely it is impossible to dismiss much of modern biblical scholarship (literary and historical work) as inadequate with this and similar views – without

serious scholarship. In doing so, the student would be opposing both the ethos of academic work and the Church's position as contained, for example, in the encyclical *Divino afflante spiritu* and the constitution *Dei Verbum*.

The student introduces a book by the writer Michael D. O'Brien's *Theophilos* as a better apologetic source than the biblical sources. (p. 53. The use of the fiction genre can be helpful, see, for example, Gerd Theisses, *Galilejský, historické bádání o Ježíši formou vyprávění*, but it cannot be contrasted with research, as the student does.

The student's bias is shown in his mention of R. E. Brown: 'Brown is not trustworthy regarding a priori assumptions, which weakens his claims significantly.' (p. 54) Here the student, citing an unrelated discussion, disqualifies a reputable biblical scholar.

If the student writes: "How many modern exegetes today would defend their position to the point of being martyred? Rather, the supposedly superior modern approach may be considered as more colonial than scientific." (p. 43) begs the question of whether he is willing to distinguish between the settings of the academy and the church, and ultimately why he wants to build a career through PhD work in the supposedly immoral setting of the former.

2.5 Overall, I have reservations about the student's speculative history and insensitivity to context. The lack of work with sources and the many generalizations detract from the credibility of the work. The insensitivity to the connection between faith and living conditions is very clear. The student lets one of his key writers Avery Dulles speak on the matter: "'From the sixth to the eleventh century the general level of culture was so low, and the social conditions were so unsettled, that theology had no real opportunity to establish itself as a science.'" (p. 119) only to knock the quoted author down with an *ad hominem* attack. Yet it is understandable, even by comparisons from the present, that opportunities to develop faith are co-determined, though certainly not determined, by historical circumstances: whether people live in peace or war, oppression or freedom, are materially secure or impoverished, illiterate or educated, whether the Church is persecuted or part of the ruling system, whether Christianity is cultivated in a small community or is folk, customary or anonymous.

Although he asks: "A key question is then whether and to what extent there was any attempt to disseminate apologetics to ordinary Christians to develop their capability to explain their faith to others when called upon." (p. 120), but who should conduct these experiments and efforts? Similarly, he writes about the Middle Ages: "The development of apologetical preparation was possible. The well-developed parish system had local priests of varying education." (p. 123). In the territory of the Bohemia, however, the parish system developed only under the Enlightenment ruler Joseph II. The ideas of medieval religious education are amusing, some reminiscent of the (somewhat sectarian) activities of the old Unity of the Brethren, some of Geneva under Calvin (p. 123). In this respect, I also find naive the student's justification of the Reformation by the absence of proper apologetics.

When a student criticizes (not only) medieval apologetic production as merely academic and clerical, the question arises as to what else it could have been. From the way society and the Church were structured, the possibilities of its production were derived. The student in the thesis does not seem willing to distinguish an understanding of the state of the church and the reasons for that state from an appreciation of it.

With regard to the Czech post-communist context, I would like to add that direct apologetic address can easily evoke the memory of the state's forced ideology, or even before that, the union of the throne and the altar. The author's conception of apologetics is perhaps culturally appropriate for the American environment with its "marketplace of ideas" and the dissemination of faith through private media.

2.6 The student's interest in the Anglo-Saxon environment is a legitimate narrowing of the topic. The problem is the lack of reflection on this narrowing, manifested in generalising turns of phrase "universal, all" etc. The lack of a sense of context also manifests itself in a kind of programmatic notion of Christianity as a minority group defending itself against a hostile world ("We are perpetually in diaspora," p. 24; "Attitude to openness really should not reflect secular cultural norms: after all, Christians should automatically be counter-cultural," p. 261). But there are areas and periods when Christianity was not a minority. What agenda is the student pursuing by stylizing Christianity as a counter-cultural minority?

2.7 The student should take more care to clarify the terms they are working with. This would help him strengthen his thesis. For example, there is the term canonical exegesis (p. 42): while he operates with it, it is not clear what exactly he means by the method.

He also works very vaguely with the term historical-critical method - given the more than two hundred year history of this research and its very different forms and schools, a vague use of the term will not help the student to make a clear argument. I think he himself implicitly acknowledges the need for historical understanding when he states: "a study of the how the earliest Christian generations wrote and received must set aside all theories except what was understood by the Church." (p. 42). How the early Christians understood the biblical texts is, after all, also a subject of historical inquiry.

The same applies to his use of the terms enlightenment, modernism and above all tradition. For example, on p. 53 he writes: "... which serves atheistic Enlightenment ideas and modernist alternatives to Tradition." But the Enlightenment does not have only, and perhaps not primarily, atheistic currents.

I see a big problem in the lack of a definition of tradition. The way the student uses the term to refer to the preservation of the treasure of faith does correspond to the constitution of *Dei Verbum*. But DV 8 also writes about the growth of tradition, including through the experience of the faithful, which does not appear in the student. When he writes about fundamental theology that: "In rejecting Balthasar's traditional way..." (p. 217), it is not clear what he means by traditional ways. After all, Balthasar himself also defined himself against, for example, neo-Scholasticism, while FT proponent Tracy writes extensive treatises on tradition. Even the term postmodern is not clearly anchored. When the student, for example, associates it with Balthasar's publications from the early 1960s as a current against which Balthasar defines himself, it causes embarrassment (cf. p. 215).

2.8 In section 3.1, the student quotes extensively from two publications by Hans Urs von Balthasar. These passages are among the weakest in the whole dissertation. The student gives lengthy quotations which he comments on only briefly; his own grasp of the problems presented by Balthasar is not apparent. The student notes only the places that fit his preconceived concept.

E.g. on the quotation of Balthasar on p. 188, cit. 502, the student responds completely out of turn. Similarly elsewhere. On p. 192, cit. 516 and 517, Balthasar is clearly coming to terms with Karl Rahner's transcendental anthropology, and also with neo-Thomism. The student's comments are virtually unrelated to the content. Is Balthasar really an example of non-academic apologetic theology for unlearned believers? I'm not sure the student made a good choice with Balthasar. Certainly Balthasar's subtle theology is not easily presented to wide circles. Some exceptions are the appeals to Balthasar's theological aesthetics.

The problem then arises when referring to Balthasar in connection with the Council. In what ways did he influence the Council? In what ways did it not? The student does not give clear answers. The earlier vagueness returns here (and words about the third way do not help matters).

2.9 The dissertation's occasional reference to a theologian's confession, e.g. "even the Protestant Andrew Louth comments that he is showing an establishment of the position as Pope' (p. 65), raises the important question of how to treat the affiliation of persons to different traditions of the Church in scholarly argumentation. When is the introduction of a confession legitimate, when is it purposeful, and when do we use it to disqualify another? (By the way, Andrew Louth is better known today as an Orthodox theologian after his conversion in 1989).

2.10 I find it methodologically problematic to reject the principles of the Reformation on the basis of the ancient Christian letter of Ignatius (cf. 72). For one thing, these principles would first have to be seriously presented, even in light of the context in which they were formulated. And then it would have to be assessed whether the statements of Ignatius' letter follow the issues addressed by the Reformers. Mere verbal agreement is not enough.

2.11 The student covers a huge area, more than he can deal with individual theologians and writers in any great detail. He does not usually draw on more than one secondary source, and only occasionally reaches out to sources. In dealing with the documents of the Council, which is part of the focus of the dissertation, I lack secondary literature (Alberigo, Pesch, Komonchak ...).

The dissertation makes too many vague, generalizing, and unsubstantiated claims: e.g., "apologetics was mostly rejected as 'the old way'" (p. 11) – by whom? why?; "meanwhile, unprepared faithful were being left open to many other narratives." (p. 159)

2.11 The description of the situation of the Church at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries up to the Second Vatican Council in terms of "the developing of an us-them paradigm and 'retreating behind the walls'" (p. 180) captures the reality well, though certainly simplistically. But it does not correspond to the fact that French Catholic literature was not apologetic and, above all, that it did not create a culture and was elitist (p. 179, cit 468). Cf. the widely, even in this country, influential works of authors such as Leon Bloy, Paul Claudel, Charles Peguy.

Evaluation

Mr. Nicolson's dissertation contains a large number of thought-provoking challenges. It demonstrates an interest in a commitment to the transmission of faith, it reflects on past avenues on which this transmission can build and new ones to open up, and it seeks to engage people regardless of their level of intellectual preparation. It mentions inspiring figures of the Anglo-Saxon tradition from the first half of the 20th century as well as from the present. By its very nature, it fulfils Pope Francis' wish that theology should cease to be done from the table and that new methods of theological thinking and work should be applied and developed.

At the same time, as an opponent, I had to state fundamental reservations about the presented concept of apologetics and its individual elements. The concept is problematic with regard to the current state of theological knowledge. Unfortunately, the student himself, by deliberately defining himself against academic conventions, meets the fact that the work he submits according to the established conventions is hardly close to the expected standard. With regard to the evaluation criteria of the Faculty of Theology of the University of South Bohemia setting the conditions for the acceptance of qualifying theses, it can be stated that the submitted thesis does not meet this standard in at least two points. The work draws

uncritically on sources of dubious character and the core (a substantial part) of the work is a creative project, but without a solid theoretical basis or justification.

For these reasons I do not recommend the thesis in this form for acceptance and suggest its reworking.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Petr Jandejsek', written in a cursive style.

Mgr. Petr Jandejsek, Th.D.

V Kutné Hoře dne 16. 11. 2023