

THE NATURE AND IDENTITY OF APOLOGETICS IN LIGHT OF THE CALLS OF SCRIPTURE AND THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, by Stuart Nicolson M.A.

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Introductory observations:

The thesis presents a coherent analysis of the presence of apologetics in different eras of Christianity and the usage of three analyzed Petrine principles.

The thesis can be considered a novum for the field of theology. The topic is innovative; however, the potential for serious synthesis suggested in the title was not realized completely successfully.

Identification of objectives/goals/reasoning and argumentation:

For the doctoral thesis, the objective is defined quite broadly, and the scope of analysis is too large: "...this study seeks answers in the history of apologetics, how it developed, and to what extent it related to the original Petrine call."

The author offers a rather historical-apologetic treatise on the relevance and necessity of Petrine apologetics, and only secondarily presents a systematic encounter with the "nature and identity of apologetics". In other words, the thesis is author's apologia of Petrine apologetics and its principles. This fact in itself would not be a problem, but it is obvious that the author returns to his own apology also in such topics that are unnecessary for the main objective, thus proving his real interest. For example: p. 72, footnote 144: apologetics against protestant *sola scriptura* principle; p. 73: "Eucharist, validity, succession, and sacrifice – *themes that remain important today in apologetics*"; p. 132: discussion about the True Cross pieces, etc.

Sometimes, the line of argumentation is misleading. For example: until the reader reaches part 2a.4, it seems that the author is persuading us that the gospels (p. 55) and different patristic sources (e.g., p.65) were primarily intended as apologetic works. Here is the quotation about the gospels: *"This study has sought to show that the Gospels contain apologetical content, to illustrate the idea that apologetical content has been not only presented by the Christian Scripture writers from the beginning and also willed by God through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit but also that it was an integral part of the communication between Jesus and both those with good will towards him and those hostile to him to various extents. Using the Petrine definition of apologetics, it is possible to identify apologetical content in nearly half of all Sunday Gospel readings in Ordinary Time, which means at least a quarter of the Synoptics have apologetical content. Therefore, using the Synoptic Gospels as evidence, apologetics – being prepared, to respond, in a Christian manner – has been important since the beginning of Christianity, has been central to the presentation of Christianity in Scripture, and continues to be such in today's Christian environment."* And here is the quotation from the conclusion: *"Supporting preparation, the Gospels have been found to include apologetical content regularly and often, with approximately one quarter having sections or units of content with some level of apologetics; this is either preparatory for apologetics or as models on how to respond to hostile or friendly questions. It is not claimed that this was the primary object of these texts but that it was modelled as part of the Christian experience both in the authors' intentions (human and divine) as well as being presented to the reader (or listener) as part of the Christian experience."* (p. 80)

Because of the misleading character of this argumentation, I think that the explanation about the primary character of the Gospels and patristic texts should have been moved before their proper analysis.

This problem with the line of reasoning seems to repeat itself more often and it is a serious problem of the thesis. Again, author states as a conclusion to the part 4.1 (regarding the statistics in the USA): “Therefore, it is clear that the post-conciliar reduction of catechesis in favour of a more experiential education has led to a reduction in ordinary faithful understanding the faith.” (231) This sentence stands alone, raising questions to the reader (e.g.: Is this a scientific fact or merely an opinion? How can it be proven?, etc.), but only in part 4.3 author explains this sentence in a more understandable manner.

Author’s interpretation of von Balthasar also seems to be oversimplification. On p.187 von Balthasar calls for “perspective of service, of the commission received” in order to imitate Christ “who gave himself for all in order to save all” while the author calls for a “more developed Christianisation of the world”. These two positions are not contradictory, they are related, but they are not simply interchangeable.

Regarding the discussion about “passing on faith”, author presents positions much closer to the older vision of Dei Filius with its intellectual understanding of faith than to the Dei Verbum with its more personal and complex conception.

On page 261, the author states: “Attitude to openness really should not reflect secular cultural norms: after all, Christians should automatically be counter-cultural,” while he uses reference to Acts 17:6: “But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other believers before the city officials, shouting: ‘These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here...’” The interpretation of the biblical verse seems forced and does not support author’s argumentation.

Structure of the thesis:

The thesis is divided appropriately, and the logic of the argument develops in accordance with the intended order of argument.

Still, one observes some unnecessary detours: e.g., *against* modern historical critical exegesis, pp. 42-44.

Used literature/Citations:

The thesis utilizes enough of relevant apologetic sources from the Christian history as well as of the contemporary times; however, it is limited solely to English sources. Some new books on apologetics are missing, e.g., *The New Apologetics*, by Matthew Nelson, 2022.

The author often does not go back to the original sources; he uses either English translations or their references in secondary sources (e.g., p. 147, footnote 365 quoting “The Ratzinger Report” from the Catholic Answers website). Even in those moments when it is desirable to support an opposing view, the author merely refers to a general place in the secondary literature, e.g., p. 118: “This study approaches apologetics differently from Dulles, who leaves a great chasm between the two positions described: he separates the identity of apologetics (‘an apologetically inclined mentality’) from having ‘a strictly dogmatic stance’ – *the latter being a not uncommon accusation that apologetics is too strict and dogmatic.*” (who says so?) In this way the work loses a comprehensive and objective view of the whole subject.

A certain problem may appear since the author uses many internet references. The risks with this issue could be proven from the text, i.e.:

- p.16, footnote 27: quote must be made so as to show the original source, not the link of internet storage;
- p. 53, footnote 80: unreliable source;
- p. 69, footnote 131: a weak source, 'How the Sabbath Was Changed', Sabbath Truth, accessed 7th April 2023, <https://www.sabbathtruth.com/sabbath-history/how-the-sabbath-was-changed>;

It is good though that the author is aware of some of these imperfections, as he admits them on p. 175. Still, he states that "Apologetical studies on the narratives presented are beyond the general scope here." Why? These studies, if mentioned only in footnotes would be of great benefit to the reader.

In the bibliography, R. Barron is presented once as "Barron, Robert", later as "Bishop Robert Barron". Also, in the bibliography the Ecclesial documents should be listed as first.

Style and language:

The language of the thesis is of appropriate academic quality, easy to follow, clearly understandable.

Sometimes, the author uses exclamation marks (e.g., p. 25, 45, 156) so as to persuade readers with rhetorical/homiletical tools instead of utilizing academic style of presentation/explanation. Why? Does he fight against anyone?

During the exposition of his argument author mentions "Justinian apologetics definition" a lot even before the part 2b without specific concretization, which makes it very difficult for the reader to understand what he means (e.g., 11, 44, 57...).

Therefore, some parts within the thesis should have been moved around so as to make the argument more coherent and easier to follow.

The author repeats the quote of 1 Pt 3: 15-16 too often in its entirety. Also, he explains the scriptural and conciliar concept of apologetics many more times than necessary (in the introduction, again in their proper analysis, and again in part 4.2).

I identified minor deficiencies in the graphic side of the work (indentation of paragraphs in citations: e.g., p. 168, 188, 204, different size of block citations on p. 248,...).

Results

Author's analysis offers a valuable lesson on how important Petrine apologetics was to the ordinary believer and how the proclamation of the gospel was impoverished in those specific times apologetics followed "Justinian" style, when it involved solely academics.

The thesis contributes to theology by offering a new perspective on apologetics as opposed to the oft-examined *History of Apologetics* by Dulles. It is also practically fruitful because it demonstrates the possibilities of applying the documents of the Second Vatican Council in ways other than the militant stance that has been a stigma on the character of classical academic apologetics.

However, in accordance with the title and aim of the work, I would have expected a more systematic synthesis about the nature and/or principles of apologetics in today's situation

(which is much more present in the part 4.3 and further on). Offering still more specifics for readers would be the most beneficial part and novum of the thesis.

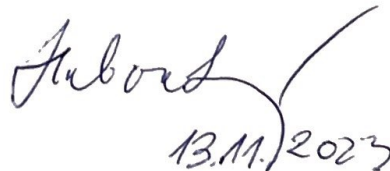
Questions:

1. While reading your thesis, a reader finds himself to understand that Petrine apologetics should be understood as a way of evangelization, as going out of oneself, as a proactive attitude toward the world. It is clearly visible e.g., in your presentation of von Balthasar who called for razing the bastions between the church and the world. At the same time, you say that “the heart of apologetics” is a response, which is a reactive attitude. How do you answer to this discrepancy?
2. In the thesis, you do not confront or comment the text of Matthew 10: 19: “But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say...” How would you comment on this in terms of being prepared as apologist, in your words: “*The more thoroughly one is prepared, the more effective one is apologetically; the more widely one is prepared, the wider the effectiveness*”?
3. What would be your own proposal of new apologetics built up in agreement with the concept of von Balthasar’s apologetics of saints? How would this concept symbiotically work out with your words about Christians being *automatically* “counter-cultural”?
4. On page 265, you state that “The secular world should be Christianised” and you refer to GE2, which speaks about the Christian formation, which should contribute to the good of the whole society. Explain how you understand these two statements to be coherent.

Final verdict:

The thesis meets the requirements for the doctoral dissertation; therefore, I recommend the thesis for defense and suggest a grade “B”.

KOŠICE


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