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Q&A: General Apologetics

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General Apologetics:

Question: I'm working on an article on "historical apologetics." Who are the main "players" in the area of historical apologetics these days? What are the classic works -- those that are the must reads?

Answer: Historical apologetics is a tough field in the sense that there are very few good books that provide much of an overview. You often have to do piecemeal research by getting specialty texts in the separate areas. For example, the subject of ancient parallels to Christianity has experienced a bit of resurgence in recent years. But several works are far better than the typically-cited ones. Certainly one of the best is Gunter Wagner's "Das religionsgeschichtliche Problem von Romer 6, 1-11" (Zurich: Zwingli Verlag, 1962), including an incredible wealth of information. (An English translation is also available.) A great Bibliography on the subject is edited by Temporini and Haase, "Aufstieg und Niedergang der Romischen Welt" (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1984). Classical texts on this same subject during the last 100 or so years would include W. Bousset's "Kyrios Christos" (1913) and Otto Pflieger's "Early Christian Conception of Christ" (1905). Of course, Frazier's "Golden Bough" is a classic.

Question: I have a great interest in studying Intelligent Design, as well as apologetics of the creation account in Scripture. I also teach this subject. Can you recommend some general material I could work through? Answer: A general study might include:

- Behe, Michael, Darwin's Black Box (Free Press, 1996)
- Dembski, William, Intelligent Design (InterVarsity, 1999)
- Ross, Hugh, The Creator & the Cosmos (NavPress, 1993)
- Sarfati, Jonathan, Refuting Evolution (Master Books, 1999)

Question: What is the significance regarding the witness of the Holy Spirit & the relation to evidence concerning the truth about Christianity?

Answer: In the relatively few New Testament texts that address the witness of the Holy Spirit (such as Rom. 8:16; 1 Jn. 3:24; 4:13), the witness seems to be a deep, personal conviction that a person is a believer. This experience of the Holy Spirit complements the data, so that while the evidence indicates that Christianity is true, the Holy Spirit's witness indicates who belongs to the faith. It may be helpful to think of the witness as a personal relationship where the facts show that a friendship exists, and further personal experiences are an additional indication that builds on the facts. In fact, such experience might even be expected. So the evidence indicates that the facts are true and that a relationship is therefore possible, whereas the experience indicates that it is actual.

Question: Can you recommend a good introduction to philosophy text? I want something rigorous (but readable), not just a popular treatment. Please add a good introduction to the problem of evil. And how about a text on reasoning fallacies?

Answer: For a good (but still rigorous) introduction to philosophy text, I'd strongly recommend JP Moreland & William Lane Craig, Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview (Intervarsity Press, 2003). Less difficult but still good is Ronald Nash's text, Life's Ultimate Questions (Zondervan Publishing, 1999). Alvin Plantinga is very influential. On the problem of evil, you might try his classic text God, Freedom, & Evil, which was published by both Harper as well as by Eerdmans. For informal logical fallacies, I'd check almost any good logic text (such as Irving Copi's) & consult the list of Informal Fallacies that are always good for dialogues.

Question: I've been exposed to some Buddhism as well as some other non-religious eastern philosophies. And I've found there are such striking similarities to Christianity that it's difficult not to suspect that all of these are different paths leading to the same truth. I was wondering if you could recommend some good readings on this subject. You mentioned that you were once about to become a Buddhist, so I'd be really interested to know how you came to both the intellectual and personal conclusion that Christianity is where the truth lies.

Answer: It's difficult to imagine how Buddhism (or any other religion) would bear "striking similarities" to Christianity, except perhaps in certain ethical similarities or general beliefs about certain aspects of the world. The Gospel is at the center of Christianity--the Deity, atoning death, and resurrection of Jesus--and no other religion teaches any of these doctrines. In my own search, I realized, along with many critical scholars, that if Christianity were correct at these points, then Christianity would follow. So in my own studies, I concentrated on these particular, central beliefs to see if anything could be historically affirmed regarding who Jesus thought he was, whether or not he died, and whether or not he was seen again afterwards. Upon reaching the view that these Christian claims could be heavily evidenced, I came to the view that Christianity was far stronger than other religions that made claims without having evidence.

Question: I have heard that C. S. Lewis was not a Christian, but was actually a Satanist. Could you comment on this?

Answer: I have to confess that I have a very difficult time believing that Lewis was a Satanist. As a scholar of classical literature, he introduces many mythological characters that evangelicals don't normally discuss today. But this is very far from *him* being a Satanist. It seems I read somewhere years ago (but I'm not positive) that Lewis said that if he knew when he wrote *Narnia* what he knew then, he wouldn't have mentioned things like "white magic" and so on. I think Lewis is mistaken concerning various theological tenets, and some of these items are more important than others. Even if he shouldn't have used some of the images and words that he did, I fail to see how that makes everything he wrote wrong or satanic.

Question: Don't adherents of the Reformed Epistemology position hold that while evidence is not strictly necessary (i.e., the concept of God is "properly basic"), there are still good arguments and evidence available to "confirm" the inner witness of the Holy Spirit? Fideists, however, make no appeals to argument or evidence, but claim such assurance as that which is provided by the inner witness of the Holy Spirit either experienced solely on a personal level (Karl Barth) or through the "hermeneutic" of the community of faith (Lesslie Newbigin). Would that be right?

Answer: One huge issue that I have with Reformed Epistemology, or even the older Van Tillian presuppositionalist stance, is that these scholars seldom seem to get around to actually doing the evidences! But in all fairness, they say it is fine to do so. Plantinga, for instance, has an unpublished essay where he lists two dozen arguments for the existence of God. It seems to me that various presuppositionalists are softening up on this one. For the evidentialist, personal testimony and the witness of the Holy Spirit are only for believers, most likely for the purposes of personal assurance, but not to decide doctrine. This position is established by Scripture. It is not used to prove a world view with regard to unbelievers, however. After all, Paul says natural man can't understand these sorts of things, so it wouldn't seem useful with them. But neither is faith "weak" or merely a tack-on at the end of an argument. Faith, personal testimony, and the witness of the Spirit all play absolutely crucial roles and do what reason and sense data cannot: they appropriate and apply the data. They go further and provide assurance, rest, and conviction.

Question: What sources could you recommend for defending the Christian faith against the accusations given in Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*?

Answer: Probably the best book on "Da Vinci" is Ben Witherington, *The Gospel Code* (IVP, 2004). Also check out: Darrell Bock's *Breaking the Da Vinci Code* (Thomas Nelson, 2004); Hank Hanegraaff and Paul Maier, *The Da Vinci Code: Fact or Fiction?* (Tyndale, 2004); Erwin Lutzer, *The Da Vinci Deception* (Tyndale, 2004); Josh McDowell, *The Da Vinci Code: A Quest for Answers* (Holiday, FL: Green Key Books, 2006); Karl Payne, *The Da Vinci Code* (TCT, PO Box 31, Redmond, WA, 98073-0031).

Question: It seems that there is enough evidence to believe in the Christian faith. However, sometimes it still seems that there is not enough. Why would God only give us evidence but not enough to be conclusive?

Answer: You ask a good question. As Peter Kreeft likes to say, following Pascal, God's purpose is to show or give us enough data to help us to believe, but not enough to coerce us. God wants us to come on our own and pursue him. Another excellent angle is that taken by another philosopher, Paul Moser, in *Why isn't God More Obvious?: Finding the God Who Hides & Seeks* [RZIM Booklets, order at: 1-800-448-6766]. It's a wonderful angle on all this. He argues among other things that too much evidence may actually have the result of satisfying us without our ever coming to God, thereby satisfying our senses, but not contributing much to us developing a personal and family relation with him. I find these distinctions to be exceptionally helpful. The strong reasons that God does give us include a rich array of evidences that show conclusively that Christian belief cannot be wish-fulfillment alone. For example, he has given the documented cases of answered prayer, healings that cannot reasonably be explained otherwise, and especially near-death experiences that are highly evidenced. And what do we do with those believers who, during such an experience, report seeing Jesus face to face and experiencing the most incredible love they ever thought was possible? Interestingly, some of them comment how this experience answered all their own questions about God's silence. Just recently I read an email about a college professor who said that, after an NDE, he not only believes in Jesus Christ, heaven, and hell, but he has personally seen each of them!! This angle mixes both the evidential and the experiential. Remember that Jesus gave "doubting Thomas" a mild rebuke for his lack of belief (John 20:29). His point seemed to be that even though Thomas had not yet seen the risen Jesus for himself, he still should have believed the good testimony of his colleagues who *had* seen him.