

CHAPTER 3

HISTORICAL SURVEY OF CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS

Ante-Nicene Christian apologists

[period before the first ecumenical council of the church at Nicea in A.D. 325; at that point Christianity was officially tied to the Roman empire under Constantine; a time of official intolerance for Christianity, punctuated with periods of intense persecution]

The primary purposes of the apologists of this period were to demonstrate the truth of Christianity over Judaism and over the pagan religions, and to show why the church should be tolerated by the Roman state. There are very few extant patristic writings from the first century, and these are directed primarily to the church. The second century has been called the age of the apologists; and these apologetic writings continue into the third century.

[For more information on the earlier apologists, see Robert M. Grant, *Greek Apologists of the Second Century*, 1988.]

Hostility from the Roman empire

(1) Attacks against Christians in the Roman Empire under Nero and Domitian

Nero (A.D. 54-68; persecution started A.D. 64)

Peter and Paul executed in Rome
Christians tortured and killed after fire of A.D. 64

Domitian (A.D. 81-96)

John exiled to Patmos
prominent Christian citizens persecuted

(2) Settled policy under the empire in the second and third centuries

Charges:

- Linked to Jewish revolts
- Atheism
- Refusal to acknowledge the emperor
- Immorality/incest
- Cannibalism

(3) Opinions about Christians evident in correspondence between Pliny the Younger and emperor Trajan (A.D. 111-113)

(4) Attitudes about Christians evident in the brief statements of Roman historians Tacitus and Suetonius, “a novel and mischievous superstition,” “hatred of the human race”

(5) Many waves of persecution

[These usually were limited to a particular class or area; but several covered very wide areas and reached thousands of Christians; they were interspersed with periods of relative peace; the church grew tremendously during these two centuries, proving Tertullian’s statement that “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church”]

Trajan (98-117): Simeon, brother of Jesus, crucified in Jerusalem; Iganitius bishop of Antioch, thrown to beasts in Rome

Hadrian (117-138): persecuted “moderately”; Christianity progressed; still many martyrs, including Telephorus, minister of church in Rome

Antoninus Pius (138-161): liked Christians, but upheld law against them; Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna martyred

Marcus Aurelius (161-180): encouraged persecution; worst since Nero; thousands beheaded and thrown to beasts; Justin Martyr and six others scourged and beheaded in Rome; persecution throughout provinces; records from Lyons and Vienne in south Gaul; used horrible tortures to make Christians deny faith — didn’t work; citizens beheaded, others thrown to beasts; in the amphitheater Christian slave girl Blandina encouraged others, last to die, tied in net and killed by wild bull; bodies burned and thrown in Rhone (“Now we shall see whether there will be a resurrection of their bodies!”)

Septimius Sevarus (193-211): renewed bitter persecution for eleven years; most known from north Africa and Egypt; in Alexandria “many martyrs were daily burned, crucified, or beheaded”; Origen’s father Leonidas killed; noble lady Perpetua and her slave Felicitas torn by beasts in Carthage

Decius (249-251): edict to restore Roman religion, destroy Christian movement; captured and killed bishops and prominent Christians; many martyrs and confessors; Origen tortured on rack, died as result

Valerian (253-260): renewed persecution; first banish and confiscate property, then torture and death; Cyprian martyred

Diocletian and successors (284-305 abdicated; successors in West continue to 313 and in East to 323): last two years of Diocletian’s reign, terrible persecution; tried to enforce state religion; churches closed, writing burned, Christians dispossessed, made slaves; some Christians tortured, killed; worst persecutions under successors in divided empire: Maximian in the West, and Galerius in the East; churches burned; widespread use of torture and death; first effort to entirely eradicate the church by persecution; detailed descriptions in Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History*; time of great faithfulness and steadfastness of thousands of Christians; toleration finally granted by Constantine in the West in 313, and throughout the empire in 324, when Constantine became sole emperor and declared himself a Christian

Quadratus

Ca. A.D. 125

[Brief quote in Eusebius *Church History* 4:3:2]

Quadratus a citizen of Athens; called by Eusebius, “a disciple of the apostles”; apology directed to emperor Hadrian

Quadratus speaks of authenticity of Jesus’ miracles, that some of those cured and raised from dead were still alive and could be consulted

Aristides

Ca. A.D. 140

Also from Athens; called by Eusebius “our philosopher”; originally addressed to Hadrian (in Armenian fragments); later Syriac copy (recently discovered) addressed to Antoninus Pius

Aristides wrote that Christianity should be recognized throughout the whole Roman empire; that false rumors should be stopped; he demonstrated the existence of God through the beauty and majesty of the universe; underscored the foolishness of paganism; and claimed that Christians possess the purest knowledge of God and lead the purest lives

Justin Martyr

Ca. A.D. 155

Most important second century apologist; native of Samaria; later moved to Ephesus; was follower of Plato until saw bravery of Christians in face of death; did not believe charges against Christians; shown contradictions of Platonism; became Christian himself

Wrote *Against Heresies*, especially directed against Gnostics, whom many took as Christians; not now extant; idea taken up again by Irenaeus

His *Apology* addressed to Antoninus Pius (A.D. 138-161); also wrote *Second Apology*, partially preserved in Eusebius; his *Apology* prompted by the martyrdom of Polycarp in A.D. 155 or 156; Justin points out the unfairness of Polycarp’s trial; the practices of the Christians (including the Eucharist); emphasizes the eternal judgment of fire (Grant sees here the influence of the Synoptic Gospels), obviously alluding to the death by fire suffered by Polycarp

Later wrote *Dialogue with Trypho*; debate format with fictitious Trypho, a Jew; strong evangelistic thrust at Jews; especially noteworthy is his interpretation of OT prophecies as fulfilled in Christ

Arrested under Marcus Aurelius; imprisoned in Rome, scourged, beheaded

Tatian

Ca. A.D. 110-172

Assyrian from Nisibitis on the Euphrates; ca. 150, came to Rome; converted by reading the Bible

Soon wrote *Diatessaron* (Gk. “through the four [gospels]”), first attempted gospel harmony; based on John’s chronology; later nearly eradicated by church officials

Became pupil of Justin Martyr; learned about philosophy, but openly despised Greek philosophers (not as Justin); ca. 160, wrote *Address to the Greeks*, mocks Greek philosophy; Christianity older and more reasonable

After Justin killed, returned to Syria; founded ascetic, somewhat Gnostic sect “Encratites”; thus never a “saint”

Melito of Sardis

Late 2nd century

Bishop of Sardis during reign of Marcus Aurelius; in 175 wrote *Petition to the Emperor*; lists OT books (Protestant canon except for Esther; no Apocryphal books)

Philosophical opponents of Christianity

Neo-Platonism developed in late 2nd and through 3rd centuries; combined Greek philosophy with Oriental mysticism; purpose was to save paganism; degraded empirical knowledge; monistic—everything is God, emanations from the One; happiness is attained by union with the One through asceticism, meditation, and magic

Ammonius Saccas (ca. 175-243); reared a Christian but rejected it; started schools in Alexandria and Rome

Plotinus (204-269); student of Ammonius Saccus; an Egyptian; followers gathered notes (6 Enneads of 9 sections each, in *Great Books*); notes obscure and intricate; accepted Greek gods, but explained them away; opposed exclusive claims of Christianity

Porphyry (232-304); disciple of Plotinus; in 270 wrote *Against Christianity*; strong attack against the Bible; blasted allegorism in OT interpretation, would make Bible mean nothing; claimed discrepancies in Bible and lives and teaching of Christ and the apostles; according to Jerome, he claimed Daniel written in 2nd century B.C., not a prophecy; somewhat answered by Christian writers (Methodius of Tyre, Apollinaris of Laodicea, Eusebius of Caesarea); 448, all copies burned by order of Roman emperors

Athenagoras

Late 2nd century

Christian philosopher in Athens; wrote *Apology* to Marcus Aurelius and son Commodus; denies charges of atheism, cannibalism, incest; notes good, peaceful lives of Christians; good discussion on Trinity

Wrote *On the Resurrection of the Body* for philosophers in Athens; argues from philosophical “common ground”: justice of God, purpose of creation, man’s need of body and soul; does not mention Christ’s resurrection

Irenaeus

Wrote ca. A.D. 180

Disciple of Polycarp (Bishop of Smyrna, disciple of Apostle John)

Bishop of Lyons after the previous bishop was martyred under Marcus Aurelius; active as a missionary throughout Gaul, learned Gallic (Celtic)

Wrote five books against Gnosticism: *Against Heresies*; now our main source of information about the early heresies

Also wrote *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, an apologetic for the faith designed for teaching catechumens; this was rediscovered in an Armenian translation in 1904

Tertullian

Ca. A.D. 160-220

Carthage lawyer and scholar; converted when about 20 years old; wrote mostly in Latin (developed Latin theological vocabulary)

Wrote *Apology* to Septimius Severus, pointing out the absurdity of persecuting the Christians

Also wrote *Against Marcion*, opposing Gnosticism, and *Against Praxeas*, opposing patri-passianism; this second work was the most advanced so far in elucidating the doctrine of the Trinity

Later converted to Montanism, thus never a “saint”; a vivid writer; source of saying, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”

Clement of Alexandria

Ca. A.D. 155-220

Sought philosophical truth all over empire; settled in Alexandria; became head of school there; scholar in philosophy and classics

Fought Gnostics; put faith ahead of knowledge; fully adopted allegorical method in practice; wrote *Exhortation to the Heathen* (against mystery religions)

Origen

Ca. A.D. 185-254

Enthusiastic Christian youth; father martyred when Origen a teenager; worked hard to support family; very scholarly

Appointed head of school for catechumens; traveled widely; learned Hebrew in Palestine; many students in Alexandria; converted many; strict ascetic; very productive writer; started school in Caesarea; later returned to Alexandria

Careful study of text of LXX (the *Hexapla*, took 28 years to produce; written to aid apologetics with the Jews; destroyed by Moslems in 7th century); followed allegorical method of interpretation; tended to speculate in philosophical areas

Wrote *Against Celsus*, a pagan writer ca. 150 who tried to refute Christianity (Bible contradictions, etc.); Origen replied, defended Christianity; blamed faults on Gnostics and heretics

Lactantius

A.D. 240-320

Official under Diocletian; tutor of Constantine’s eldest son; “the Christian Cicero”; wrote long and eloquent work on church history, *Divine Institutions* (ca. 310)

Eusebius of Caesarea

Fl. A.D. 325

A confessor (tortured for faith); bishop of Caesarea; headed school there after persecutions over; wrote several works, including *Preparation for the Gospel*, and *Demonstration of the Gospel*; especially his *Ecclesiastical History* (the first extant church history since the book of Acts); his *Onomasticon* is first “Christian” geography, gives many geographic names; prepared 50 Bibles for Constantine

Apologists from Constantine to the Reformation

During this period Christianity was the favored religion of the Roman Empire. During this same time the old Roman Empire disintegrated and its territory was taken over by the various barbaric tribes and other ethnic groups. Later a strong and sustained attack came from the Muslims. The Western church divided into two main branches: the Roman Catholic Church (centered in Rome in the West), and the Greek Orthodox Church (centered in Byzantium in the East). The general level of learning in the church, as in society as a whole, declined markedly until the Renaissance. Yet there were many bright lights during these centuries. In this section we will discuss only a few of them.

Athanasius

A.D. 296-373

Became bishop of Alexandria at young age; preferred persuasion to force; controversy-filled life (5 exiles, including 17 years of flight and hiding—in Alexandria houses or in desert among hermits, etc.)

Wrote many letters and works against Arianism (that God the Son is a created being, only similar to God the Father), including *Discourse Against the Greeks*, and *Discourse on the Incarnation of the Word*; the one primarily used to defeat Arianism in the church and maintained the orthodoxy of the church (God the Son is the same essence with God the Father); when told that he was standing alone, his reply was “If it is the world against Athanasius, then it is Athanasius against the world!”

“G. L. Prestige declares that almost single-handedly Athanasius saved the Church from pagan intellectualism, that ‘by his tenacity and vision in preaching one God and Savior, he had preserved from dissolution the unity and integrity of the Christian faith.’”

Augustine

A.D. 354-430

Greatest thinker in early church; big influence on Roman Catholic and Protestant theology; marks transition from classical to medieval period

Before being a Christian Augustine was follower of Manicheans, then of Neo-Platonists; influenced by Ambrose to respect Christianity; converted when 32 years old (convicting verses Rom. 13:13-14, “Not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.”); became bishop of Hippo, near Carthage, and founded Augustinian order

Confessions show how God alone can satisfy the spiritual needs of man, can provide forgiveness and satisfaction in holiness

Writings against Manicheanism replace dualism with God’s sovereignty; writings against Pelagius support biblical doctrines of sin, salvation, and God’s sovereignty in salvation

Big crisis in Roman empire—barbaric invasions, sack of Rome in 410; shortly after Rome officially Christian under Theodosius in 392; first time in over 700 years; many blame defeat on leaving Roman gods; Augustine’s reply, *City of God*; Rome punished for its sins; besides, Rome part of city of man, thus necessarily mixed with evil; city of God (the church) most important; kingdom passages of Bible spiritualized to be the Christian church, invisible and visible; authority of God given to the church

John of Damascus

Fl. ca. A.D. 740

Apologist with the Muslims; wrote *Dialogue Between a Christian and a Saracen*

Anselm of Canterbury

A.D. 1033-1109

Archbishop of Canterbury; great ability; wrote two seminal books; one (*Proslogion*) presented the “ontological argument” for the existence of God; this is regarded as a classic *a priori* proof of God’s existence

His other work (*Cur Deus Homo?*) showed the necessity of the Redeemer’s being both God and man in order to satisfy divine justice in the substitutionary atonement

Roger Bacon

A.D. 1214-1294

Not to be confused with Francis Bacon of the 17th century; did much early work in experimental science, as well as language and philosophy; preferred investigation by experimentation as more reliable than scholastic conclusions; believed in the study of the Bible in the original languages would help understand nature; ahead of his own time (by about three centuries)

Thomas Aquinas

A.D. 1225-1274

Dominican monk; greatest philosopher and theologian of Middle Ages; ultimate exponent of natural theology, based on categories of Aristotle

Produced great work *Summa Theologica* and also *Contra Gentiles*; works requested by missionaries in Spain

Theology organized to prove as much as possible by philosophy (God, creation, providence), with the final book showing the truth of revelation (Trinity, sacraments, incarnation, heaven, hell)

Changed church from being primarily Platonic-Augustinian to being Aristotelian; apologetics more based on empirical observation of nature and deductions from same; Augustinianism revived by Protestant Reformation; teachings of Aquinas now revived by contemporary Thomistic philosophy (we can truly know reality through our experience)

Aquinas criticized the *a priori* methodology of Anselm and others, preferring the *a posteriori* arguments based on experience or evidences of nature; central was his reliance on the principle of causality, pointing to the first, highest, or uncaused Cause as God

Raymond Lull

A.D. 1236-1315

Dedicated missionary to the Muslims in northern Africa; many missionary trips; persecuted; debated with Muslim scholars

First to write extensively about theology in a national language (not only in Latin; wrote also in Catalan and in Arabic)

William of Occam

Ca. A.D. 1280-1349

English Franciscan scholar; summoned to Avignon to answer charges of heresy; became advocate of power of emperor over that of the pope

Opposed realism of Thomists; asserted nominalism (empirical evidence is basis for knowledge; universals are created by reason; only particulars exist; thus no rational proof for God; must be taken by faith); opposed unnecessary assumptions (“Occam’s Razor”)

Selected notes on apologists since the Reformation

This period contains many apologetic works. Here follow a few comments on selected apologists and their works.

John Calvin

A.D. 1509-1564

Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* are dedicated to Francis I of France, and are in reality an apologetic work describing the beliefs of the Protestants and an appeal for their toleration by the state. In that sense they are in the tradition of Luke-Acts and of the second century apologists.

Joseph Butler

A.D. 1692-1752

Bishop of Durham. Butler's *The Analogy of Religion* was a defense to stem the tide of deism and skepticism sweeping over England and the Continent. He relied heavily on reason and evidentialism, showing that no one can prove Christianity false. For Butler "probability is the guide of life." Revealed religion in the Bible is analogous to natural revelation (which deists accepted). Both have difficulties, but agree in what they teach.

William Paley

A.D. 1743-1805

Paley's *View of the Evidences of Christianity* and his *Natural Theology* provide the definitive statement of the classical teleological argument. Various areas of the creation show the hand of an intelligent creator, and cannot be accounted for by mere chance. For over a century was required reading for all English college students (Darwin read Paley's *Evidences* as a requirement in college!). He produced the famous watchmaker argument; modern atheist Richard Dawkins attacked it in *The Blind Watchmaker* (1986). The watchmaker argument is now being refined in the Intelligent Design movement, for example, the excellent work of Fazale Rana, *The Cell's Design* (2008).

Nineteenth century apologists

Three major attacks against the Bible each produced a reaction from Christian apologists and biblical scholars: Darwinian evolution, Marxism, and destructive biblical criticism.

In general the many apologetic writings of this century followed the lines set out by Butler and Paley. Prominent Christian apologists included George Park Fisher, Alexander Balmain Bruce, James Orr, and William Henry Green.

Twentieth and twenty-first century apologists

The beginning of the century saw increasing attacks from the area of biblical criticism, answered by many biblical scholars (e.g., Robert Dick Wilson, Benjamin Breckenridge Warfield). Likewise, the increasing attack from Modernism led to many works defending classic Fundamentalism (e.g., publication of *The Fundamentals* in the 1920's; John Gresham Machen's *The Virgin Birth of Christ, The Origin of Paul's Religion, Christianity and Liberalism, What Is Faith?, The Christian Faith in the Modern World*).

Much of the American New Evangelical movement was designed to make Christianity more understandable and respected in scholarly circles in our increasingly non-Christian world.

These writers came from a background in Fundamentalism, but believed the Fundamentalists were failing by their ecclesiastical separatism and their excessive dogmatism and intolerant attitudes toward their opponents. Leading apologists in this tradition include Edward John Carnell and Bernard Ramm. Older writers in this school tried to uphold biblical inerrancy, while more modern writers generally try to uphold spiritual reliability. Often these scholars are not dogmatic in such areas as evolution vs. creation.

British biblical apologists, as F. F. Bruce and modern Intervarsity Press writers, often take a more moderating position, basing conclusions not on dogmatic teachings, but on the results of historical or literary investigations. These results, for example, will often assert general biblical accuracy, but not biblical inerrancy.

One British apologist who has achieved great fame is Clive Staples Lewis, who was not a trained theologian, but rather a scholar of Medieval and Renaissance English Literature. Lewis's many works (e.g., *God in the Dock*, *Surprised by Joy*, *Mere Christianity*, *Miracles*, *The Problem of Pain*, *The Screwtape Letters*, *The Great Divorce*, *The Abolition of Man*, the Narnia series, and the Space Trilogy) have an apologetic purpose, seeking to make basic Christianity understandable and applicable to modern "secular" society.

Modern American apologists who follow the traditional or evidentialist school include John Warwick Montgomery, Gordon R. Lewis, Josh McDowell, Norman Geisler, John H. Gerstner, Hugh Ross, Robert Newman, and Fuzale Rana.

A small but influential school among reformed Christians is the presuppositional school led by Cornelius Van Til and his followers (for later developments in the thought of Van Til's disciples, see articles in the *Westminster Theological Journal* 57:1 [Spring, 1995]; this issue marks the centennial of his birth [5/3/1895]). John M. Frame, a disciple of Van Til, has updated and somewhat broadened the presuppositional approach, *Apologetics: A Justification of Christian Belief* (2nd ed., 2015). A more logically consistent, some would say rationalistic, presentation of presuppositionalism is provided by Christian philosopher Gordon H. Clark, being carried on by John Robbins and others. The modern Reconstructionist movement favors a presuppositional apologetic.

On the other hand, renowned Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga has defended "Reformed apologetics" from a more traditional stance of warranted belief (in several books; e.g., *God and Other Minds: A Study of the Rational Justification of Belief in God* [1990], *Warranted Christian Belief* [2000], and *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism* [2011], and *Knowledge and Christian Belief* [2015]).

Francis A. Schaeffer (e.g., *The God Who Is There*, and *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*) took a moderating position, requiring a philosophical "pre-evangelism." More recently Nancy Pearcey has maintained Schaeffer's apologetic and cultural approach (as in her *Total Truth*:

Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity [2008], and *Finding Truth: 5 Principles for Unmasking Atheism, Secularism, and Other God Substitutes* [2015]).

Another apologist school is very active at the present time: the creation-science movement, which seeks to demonstrate scientifically as well as scripturally that the universe is a recent creation of God, depending heavily on flood geology. This movement includes Henry M. Morris and the Creation Research Society (<http://www.creationresearch.org>), and Ken Ham and the Answers in Genesis organization (<http://www.answersingenesis.org>); it is gaining strength through its school accrediting agency (Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools). An older evangelical scientific organization, the American Scientific Affiliation (<http://www.asa3.org>), generally supports an old age for the universe, with a variety of opinions regarding theistic evolution. The Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute (<http://www.ibri.org>), led by Robert C. Newman, and the organization Reasons to Believe (<http://www.reasons.org>), headed by Hugh Ross favor an old age for the universe but oppose theistic evolution.

A growing modern apologist movement is the Intelligent Design (“ID”) movement. Led by legal scholar Phillip Johnson (*The Wedge of Truth*), it enlists information and communication theory and the scientific parameters of intelligent design (mathematician and philosopher William Dembski [*Intelligent Design*, and *The Design Inference*]) to such phenomena as irreducible complexity in elementary biological systems (molecular biologist Michael Behe [*Darwin’s Black Box* and *The Edge of Evolution*] and biologist Michael Denton [*Nature’s Destiny*, and *Evolution: A Theory in Crisis*]). Typical websites include the Discovery Institute (www.discovery.org) and the Access Research Network (www.arn.org). This movement does not seek to identify the “designer,” but seeks merely to demonstrate that there must be a designer, that mere chance cannot explain the information we see in DNA and other systems. Because of this limited objective, the movement finds supporters from both recent-creationists and old-earth creationists. The ID movement uses books, journals, web sites, and university appearances to deliver its message, and has been quite effective.

Throughout these two centuries historical apologetics has continued unabated. Arguing from archaeology and history, Christian scholars have defended the truthfulness of the biblical record. Popular writers like Lee Strobel in his “*Case for . . .*” books (Christ, Miracles, Faith, Creator, etc.) presents current arguments from his viewpoint as a news reporter. Recent strongly researched historical studies have defended the resurrection of Jesus Christ (as N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* [2003], Gary R. Habermas and Michael Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* [2004], and Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* [2010]).