

*Imaginative Apologetics: Theology, Philosophy and the Catholic Tradition*, Andrew Davison, ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011; 169pp. Reviewed by Jerry Ireland.

In this volume edited by Andrew Davison, several scholars, mostly from the Anglican or Roman Catholic Tradition, offer their contributions to the apologetic task. The writers set out to re-imagine apologetics in light of methods and practices they deem problematic in more traditional approaches. They do this primarily by exploring avenues such as literature, the visual arts, ethics, and so forth, regarding how a Christian understanding of these fields might foster a more inclusive apologetic agenda. As such there exists an effort here to expand the role and meaning of reason to include “imagination”—or, what Davison calls a “thick account of reason” (16).

The book is divided into four parts—“Faith and Reason Reconsidered,” “Christian Apologetics and the Human Imagination,” “Being Imaginative about Christian Apologetics,” (I confess to being slightly confused as to the precise difference between parts two and three), and finally, “Situating Christian Apologetics.” Part one calls for a renewed approach to apologetics by claiming that “proof’s apologetics” is ill-conceived, and by issuing a call for apologetics within community, centering on a uniquely Christian understanding of reason that extends beyond the acquisition of knowledge. Part two explores apologetics and the role of imagination through popular literature and the thought of C.S. Lewis. Part three explores atheism, ecclesiology and ethics. Part four examines cultural hermeneutics, a somewhat random sampling of apologetic approaches throughout history, and finally apologetics and the natural sciences.

While an interesting read owing to its scope and variety, the text ultimately suffers in that much of what the authors put forth as in need of reconsidering is done so in a fragmentary way, and in the manner of straw-man arguments. By this I mean that at several points the authors criticize the notion of “proofs” in the apologetic task, but they do so by overstating the goals of most apologists, especially those in the evidential or classical traditions, with whom I suspect the authors primarily associate (wrongly, as I argue below) this notion of “proofs.” In my view, this constitutes a major weakness in the overall program of this text. My main problem with this text lies in the foundation and premises upon which it proceeds, and therefore I will direct a majority of my criticisms to that issue.

The first question raised here is, what do the author’s mean by “imaginative”? In the forward, John Milbank argues against “an assumption that the only ‘reason’ which discloses truth is a cold, detached reason that is isolated from both feeling and imagination” (xxii). In chapter one, Hughes argues further that imaginative apologetics refers to a unique account of reason that must also include the role of faith. Furthermore, he believes that attempts to “prove” Christian truth misunderstand the unique nature of faith and reason within Christianity. There is nothing particularly novel about this, though. But Hughes goes beyond merely advocating for the importance of both, and I will return to his thoughts on that subject below.

Meanwhile, Andrew Davison (chapter two) accuses classical apologists of presuming a neutral account of reason, one that fails to take into account the Christian worldview that provides the Christian interpretation to the objects of reason. Here, Davison sounds an awful lot like a Reformed Epistemologist operating on properly basic beliefs (see p. 15). He argues that one does not “argue to” these basic beliefs, but

“show(s) what difference it makes to think this way” (15). He goes on to add that Christian community holds forth the potential to “embody a particular ‘faith’ or worldview” (26). Leaning heavily here on Wittgenstein, Davison argues, “a healthy apologetic depends upon a healthy church” (28). His point seems to be that living out one’s faith constitutes defending it.

At several points, writers in this volume appear to lob hand grenades at an evidentialist or classical approach to apologetics. For example, in his forward, John Milbank decries what he deems a problematic attempt to defend Christianity on “grounds other than faith” (xiii). His argument here seems to be directed at evidence-based approaches to apologetics. But he only minimally defines “grounds other than faith” as the territory of one’s opponent. By “opponent,” Milbank means those to whom we direct our apologetic efforts, who presumably operate from a proof-centered perspective.

Similarly, John Hughes’s chapter (1) “Proofs and Arguments” directly attacks the notion of proofs as holding forth any promise in the apologetic task. Specifically, Hughes criticizes argument and evidence-based apologetics, in both the Catholic and Protestant tradition as recent developments founded upon an unwarranted western confidence in reason and common sense. Hughes’s chapter sets the tone for much of the book (being that it is, not by accident, the first chapter). In this chapter, Hughes decries the use of evidences related to the Resurrection, fulfilled prophecy, biblical archaeology and more. He also specifically singles out Richard Swinburne’s attempts to establish the probability of the Resurrection as part of an apologetic “project of proof” that is doomed to failure. But why is Swinburne’s effort doomed to fail? Because, according to Hughes, such an approach derives from a rather modern, Enlightenment epistemology (foundationalism), and because all “ultimate questions...are...incapable of proof” (7).

But there are several issues with the claims of Milbank and Hughes. First, the notion that modern, traditional approaches to apologetics depend on recent developments—“20 or 30 years ago”—has no historical basis whatsoever (3). Some of the very items Hughes mentions, such as fulfilled prophecy, have a quite ancient lineage dating to the first and second centuries in both the writings of the NT, and in early apologists such as Justin Martyr. Second, regarding Hughes’s critique of “proof”, *no* modern apologist that I know of in the evidentialist or classical tradition entertains any such lofty aspiration as that of “proof.” And so the frequent use of this word amounts to a straw-man argument. Even the example Hughes himself cites, that of R. Swinburne, by Hughes’s own admission is engendered toward probability. Evidential apologists simply do not aspire to proof per se. This is simply a false claim made by the authors of this text that has no foundation in reality. Second, while proof may be unattainable, one can work, based on available evidence—and there is a good bit of evidence to work with—toward the best possible explanation of the datum. This, I would argue, represents the program of most apologists who appeal to evidences, including Swinburne. Hughes’s gross overstatement of what evidential apologists aim for thereby undermines the books entire approach.

So too does a portion of a chapter by Craig Hovey, titled “Christian Ethics as Good News” (Chapter 7). Hovey suspects that “proof-apologists” (again, a terribly misleading choice of words), might believe that “the point of being a Christian is to be right or to be rational” (99). But I know of no apologist who makes such a claim, and indeed, Hovey offers no evidence in support of his assertion. I think most apologists who

employ reason and evidences would avow that “the point” of being a Christian is to know Jesus and to follow Him, and would simply avow that God has endowed human creatures with the capacity to reason and use our minds productively. The fact that they use evidences does not on any account imply that they understand “being right” as the goal of faith as Hovey suggests.

Hovey says, “we will never be able to say anything more true than the claims our living make” (110). He follows this up with the claim that “proof apologists,” by winning arguments, deny the need to embody Christian ethics. But that is just nonsense. Hovey sets the ideas of loving and disciple making in opposition to knowing and making arguments. This division though cannot be found in Scripture, which frequently and unambiguously advocates argumentation and encourages the acquisition of knowledge, all the while teaching the importance of loving people (see Luke 11:52; Acts 24:22; 2 Cor. 6:6; Phil. 1:9; 2 Tim. 3:14-16).

All this is to say that often the authors of this text at times labor to drive a wedge between so-called “imaginative apologetics” and more traditional methodologies that rely primarily on argumentation and evidences. Yet I see no reason why these approaches cannot and should not go hand-in-hand. Without denying the importance of Christian ethics, there are questions that cannot be answered by one’s behavior. How for example, can an ethical approach alone address the challenges of religious pluralism? Are there no loving Hindus or Buddhists? What can love tell a person about whether or not the resurrection actually happened? While living out one’s faith certainly has apologetic value, this must go along with reasoned defenses and arguments as the apostle Paul clearly models (Acts 17; 19). At times the authors hint that they too would agree with this. But their lopsided denigration of evidentialism as a method says otherwise.

While I stand in agreement with general idea behind this text—namely, that apologetics can and should extend beyond merely rational arguments, I also have other issues with some of the content. For example, Donna J. Lazenby’s chapter titled “Apologetics, Literature and Worldview” in essence advocates for using contemporary literature as a means of cultural assessment. I think this represents a valid point and one worth making. However, her essay lacks any reference to assessing how far an apologist should go to understand the culture, and what constitutes grounds that are “off-limits.” Perhaps in her view, nothing is off limits, and if so I strongly disagree.

To illustrate, Lazenby says that literature provides a means of discovering “what people are spiritually hungering for.” She cites Paul’s quoting of Greek poets as evidence that Scripture supports the notion of apologetics proceeding from a basis in popular literature. Up to this point I am very much in agreement. However, I strongly question the turn to the *Twilight Saga* as a worthy avenue of apologetic engagement. Vampire novels and the Greek poets cited by Paul are just not the same thing. A more *a propos* analogy for this sort of popular horror works might be found in the gladiator games of antiquity, rather than among classic literature. In other words, the grace of Jesus Christ, so central as it is to the Christian message, does not require that the apologist read about the graceless, violent, and lustful world of vampires, any more than it demanded that second-century Christian apologists participate in gladiator spectacles in order to better understand *that* culture’s debasing and inhumane appetites. Furthermore, we might do well to recall that the second-century Church father Irenaeus criticized the Gnostics for

their participation in gladiator games (*Against Heresies*, 5.3), and were he around today would likely have something similar to say about the *Twilight* series.

Even though I am largely in agreement with the notion of thick descriptions of reason as it applies to the apologetic task, I think the largely negative assessment of more traditional approaches is poorly argued in this text and founded upon false assertions. This results in an apologetic agenda that appears ill conceived, and in one that pits the values of Reformed and presuppositional apologetic methods against that of evidentialists and classical apologists. That the authors favor the former over the latter two approaches is apparent, and with that I have no problem. But, my criticisms could have easily been allayed by a fairer and sounder treatment of evidentialists and classical methodologies. I don't expect the authors of this text to agree with those who take an evidential approach, but I do expect them to fairly represent them, and they simply have not done this. That said, this text does make a useful conversation piece for an advanced course on apologetic method, and does highlight some of the strengths of Reformed and presuppositional approaches.