



The landscape of apologetics

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My subject is *the landscape of apologetics*, the giving of a reason for the hope that is within us as Christians, in our contemporary situation in Scotland in 2012.



My background

A little bit of background first of all. I became a Christian at university in my late teens through a long intellectual search. I wasn't happy with the advice '*just believe Donald ... have faith*'. As a then trainee scientist, I had to ask 'Why?' (and that has remained an important thing for me ever since). I applied my scientific training in being prepared to be honest in response to the evidence I found, whether I liked it or not. After much scrutiny, I found the claims of Jesus Christ convincing, and committed my life to him. And I had a sense of calling from God to help people like myself, seeking a good intellectual basis for Christian belief. After many years working as a chemist and regulator in the nuclear industry, I felt I needed to express that sense of calling more directly in some form of full-time Christian work in apologetics. It was a step of faith to leave full-time science and do a theology diploma at Oxford University with no certain career path thereafter, but halfway through that year the unique post of Director of the Society, Religion and Technology (SRT) of the Church of Scotland was advertised, which I felt could have been written for me. I became the sixth SRT Director, with a remarkable sense of God's personal guidance on my life. And I found its work was an unexpected expression of the wider apologetic task in a way singularly fitted to our times.



The SRT Project as an apologetic for our times

The SRT Project began back in 1970, inspired by the vision of Scottish industrialist Willie Robertson, who gave a lecture in Glasgow in 1968

in which he challenged the church to get involved in technological questions. He described the impact of technology as like a pan of water heating up over the centuries, but which is now about to boil over, so rapid are the changes. Very few people were asking questions then about ethics and technology so it was an extraordinary, almost prophetic, foresight that he and the church got together and set up this project, far ahead of its time. One of the things he stressed was that in his world of industry, theologians, though well-meaning, were 'like innocents abroad'. In order for the church to communicate with the often hostile communities of science and technology, it needed to employ a person who, in order to be able to discuss issues with technologists, was someone who knew their world from the inside.¹

The wisdom of that insight underlies much of SRT's success over 40 years, and also explains why the pronouncements of church committees on scientific matters so often fall on deaf ears, or worse. For example, at a meeting in London I found myself talking with the chairman of Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI). He said 'Ah, Reverend Bruce, what brings you to this meeting?' I said, 'Well actually I'm not a Reverend, I'm a scientist.' I briefly explained my background and my SRT role. 'So you were a chemist in the nuclear industry, but now you are working for the church on technology and ethics? Hmm. That's a good idea. That's a very good idea. *Does the Church of England do something like this?*'

In this interaction there was a sense of recognition. To him I wasn't an amateur or an interloper, but 'one of us'. I belonged, and so I had a right to engage. And this sort of response was typical and demonstrates the validity of SRT's missiology of incarnation. The Church witnesses to the Incarnation – God becoming human in Jesus Christ, becoming one of us – as the ultimate way for humans to understand and believe in God. SRT's task has been something of the same. The world of science and technology is often suspicious of outsiders or anyone claiming some external authority. In order to witness to Christ in this alien context requires not proclamations but incarnations. One has to *be* in that different world, and to show good reasons why insights from Christian belief can make sense for cutting-edge technologies like genetically-modified crops or cloning, and to be prepared to argue one's case when the right opportunity arises. This is a model not just

for engaging with new technologies, but for the task of Christian apologetics in an increasingly hostile world.

I inherited this model from SRT's earliest days, which was often expressed in working groups which brought scientists round the table with ethicists, theologians and other relevant disciplines, and often a mixture of Christians and non-Christians. In 1993 I set up such a group to look at genetically-modified crops and animals with three leading geneticists, experts in animal welfare, agriculture, risk assessment, sociology, and Michael Northcott as our theologian. Over what became 5 years we thrashed out the complex ethical issues. Our resulting book *Engineering Genesis*² was influential in the subsequent GM food controversy, which broke out just after we published, most of whose issues we had forewarned. The church was there right in the thick of it.



Gaining a hearing and being prepared to give a reason ...

This incarnational approach can bring unexpected opportunities and impacts. The animal geneticist on the GM group was Ian Wilmut, then little known, but who became world famous as the man who led the team which cloned Dolly the Sheep at Roslin Institute. This dramatic breakthrough happened in the middle of our study. We had already been involved in ethical discussions with Professor Wilmut for two years before Dolly was announced. Indeed Ian sent us an embargoed copy of the *Nature* paper with a note on the bottom saying 'You should be aware of this, there may be some media interest'. Ian was genuinely surprised, as I was, at the scale of the international impact which Dolly made. It pitched me head-first into a lot of media involvement – my TV debut found me appearing on *Newsnight* being interviewed by Jeremy Paxman!

One of the intriguing things for people was that the church was *already* involved. I was deluged with e-mails, and discovered that CNN News had put a link to SRT's website. CNN had evidently searched online and found only 3 websites on cloning and ethics, of which we were one. One cannot plan for things like that, but it only happened because we were already there and doing the work of the gospel in the context of a new area of science and technology, and were in a

position to say something well-informed when the time came. Here is an example of *practical* apologetics, in which the case for Christian belief is worked out on the shop floor of the world. To gain a hearing is now the first step of apologetics, before one can get into the more traditional form of the apologetics of issues and arguments.



What are the issues on the apologetic landscape?

Looking at the landscape of apologetics reveals different sorts of issues. Some have always been there in almost any time and culture. Does God exist? Who is Jesus Christ? How can God exist with all the suffering in the world? Then there are issues which, while not universal, have been around for a very long time. The perception that science makes belief in God unnecessary or even impossible. Why trust anything the Bible said 2,000 years ago or assume it is relevant today? Doesn't the Church's practice give the lie to its message? In a world of pluralism, how can we claim this particular belief to be the true one rather than any of the others?

Thirdly, there are issues more specific to our times. For example, secular materialism – in a materialistic society many feel no need for God. Life is comfortable, science explains our physical origins, and God seems an add-on rather than a necessity to explain life. Others may be offended by anyone who implies that human beings are sinful, or that sin and judgment may be realities. On the other hand, if there is anything in religion, it is much more about spirituality and the inner self. There has also been a noticeable rise in aggressive atheism as a belief system – sometimes called the 'New Atheism' – portraying Christianity even as something evil.

These issues are set in two wider contexts. One is what is called the post- (or more accurately late-) modern condition, which involves less commitment and rather superficial loyalties, more about packaging and style, less about content than what's immediate, collage instead of coherence or consistency. The second context is a deepening cultural ignorance about what the Christian faith is, and a good deal of caricature and hearsay.



Addressing the issues by understanding the times

Classical apologetics usually addresses these questions propositionally. You provide critiques, counter-arguments and counter-evidences. The inadequacy of materialism and naturalism as philosophies to explain life's big questions remains a very strong apologetic argument. There are serious logical fallacies in seeing all 'truth' as relativism – an inadequate response to pluralism. This is fine, but it assumes that someone is already in the room *with* you, who is listening at that level. What of people who are much further away literally or conceptually, who don't take religious matters into consideration (perhaps especially in the younger age ranges)? As in my SRT Project example, you may have first to earn the right to a hearing, and, intriguingly, the Bible gives us some good clues as to how.

In many respects we are closer to Paul's situation in Athens (Acts 17) than at any time since Constantine or maybe Columba, stepping out of a Jewish context into an entirely Hellenistic one. There is a profound ignorance about what Christianity is today, recalling one Athenian response to Paul, 'What is this babbling saying?' There is a plurality of beliefs in circulation concerning what life is about – in Athens Paul was struck by how many temples and gods there were, and the philosophers spending all their time discussing the latest ideas. We are in a materialistic culture, with its own particular superstitions – 'a city full of idols'. Yet, many have a sense that there is something else 'out there', like the Athenians' 'unknown god', but which people are reluctant to commit to, or even specify.

There are many parallels between where we are now and Paul in Athens, but there's one important difference: Christianity has now been around a long time. It seems perhaps like yesterday's religion, which doesn't appeal to the culture as a whole in the way it did. This prompts a question: Why are people not seeing commitment to Christianity as being significant to their lives anymore? I think there are three particular factors and a fourth contextual one.

1. *The question of origins*: if science now offers an apparently sufficient narrative, then we don't need God any more.
2. *The idea of comfort*: if things are stable in everyday life materially, or if one is simply too busy or too diverted, then making a place for God seems unnecessary.
3. *The idea of restraint*: this is the suspicion that religion would say 'no' to things that human beings would actually like to do.

To me all three views are illusions. The illusion that the Big Bang and Darwin and natural selection all do away with the need for a Creator or at least reduce God to an add-on really doesn't work. That comfort and preoccupation with the material means that you really don't need to consider the big issues – this is an illusion, an avoidance. Lastly, the illusion that you can invent your own morality and worldview without any external restraint is an extraordinarily individualistic way of looking at the world. But to explore these with a sceptical unbeliever requires engagement.

In many ways the apologetic issue is now less about what are our arguments on questions of origin, comfort and restraint, which are well rehearsed. It is as much about how we address people in the context of today's situation, and especially the fourth factor, the post-modern condition to which I referred just now. Here the idea of making truth claims, or any commitment to anything, are viewed very sceptically. Tolerance and a non-dogmatic approach are seen as virtues over any definite belief, especially when it comes to religion and worldview. In this cultural context, preaching Jesus Christ as the Way, the Truth and the Life, and declaring that forgiveness of sins is obtainable in His name is not likely to be listened to very closely. It's not so much because it's not reasonable. It's more it that seems *implausible* that such belief is uniquely true, and sufficient to change one's life and commitments. Yet, in response to this implausibility, the lived-out lives of Christians can and do still present a powerful and compelling argument in the most understandable of all languages, that of another person – incarnation in fact.



Incarnational persuasion

I want to draw some insights from some seminars and lectures given in Oxford and London by Os Guinness in the early 1980s which eventually found expression in his allegorical book *The Gravedigger File*.³ Guinness refers to a passage in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians where Paul says, 'I have become all things to all people so by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel' (1 Cor 9:22 f.). Guinness contrasts conservative and liberal responses to this in recent times in the church. A conservative view typically responds by *proclamation* – 'by all means save some' – the Word is simply preached as the truth people need to hear, with the prayer that the Spirit will convict them. Liberals respond by *dialogue* – 'become all things to all people', but we should not preach at them. Dialogue with no message misses the point of engaging. But just preaching the Word and praying the Spirit will convict is a bit like throwing a Bible over a wall and hoping the person next door will actually pick it up, read it and be convicted. If we've never related to our neighbours to the point where they might want to read it, there will be no further engagement either! My SRT project example illustrates both the need both to engage with scientists on their own turf (or they would not otherwise listen), but also then to present the word, once it was 'made incarnate' through our engagement.

Unfortunately, we can no longer assume in Scotland today that people are already close enough to Christian belief to be able to be preached to and expect them to respond. Certainly, if someone is in a situation like the Philippian jailor who asks Paul 'what must I do to be saved?', the message is indeed very simple: 'Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved – you and your household' (Acts 16:30, 31). But most people in Scotland aren't in that place today.

In our more sceptical and unknowing era, we need a different approach to proclamation or dialogue, which Guinness calls *persuasion* – 'the creative opening of people's minds so that they see the gospel as something they want to believe in', something to be lived out in the context of real human beings and their lives. The community of believers embodies something of the truth of the Kingdom of God. From this arises an *incarnational approach* which seeks to reach the

other, in addition to using words and propositions and actual content. What Christians embody in their lived-out lives is as important as what they say. But the life alone is not enough. Words are also needed. At some point, we have to make the link clear, that enables others to see the One from whom the life is coming. I call this a *persuasive incarnational approach*.



Imaginative ways to open the closed

People are at all sorts of different levels of openness. In Scripture you also see many who are much more ‘closed’ than the Philippian jailor. In the gospels Jesus says to his disciples, ‘The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you’, but to many of His listeners, however, these were just stories (Matt 13:10–15). Jesus here quotes the telling passage in Isaiah 6 about those who hear but won’t actually listen, those who see but won’t perceive.

Guinness particularly stresses the need to find subversive ways of getting through people’s closedness, and cites all kinds of creative ways in which Jesus and the prophets before Him communicated God’s message to those who were too closed to hear the message directly. They often used a story, parable or drama to engage people, and then turned the point round to them. Their hearers *did* get the message then. For example, Nathan the prophet chooses not to confront King David directly with his adultery and worse. He knows that David is engaged by issues of justice so he tells him the story of a big landowner who wanted a feast and stole a lamb from his tenant farmer. ‘As the LORD lives, the man who did this deserves to die’, says David, predictably angry at the situation. Nathan then says, ‘*You* are the man!’, pointing to the situation that obtains between Bathsheba, Uriah and David himself. In this remarkable story (2 Sam 12), David accepts the message and repents. David is sufficiently close to God to realise that he has sinned grievously. Psalm 51 reveals the depths of what he went through.

A more common response was that of Ahab the King of Israel, who wanted Jehoshaphat to join him in battle (1 Kings 22). Jehoshaphat says, ‘Let’s find out what the Lord says’. The local school of prophets were all prophesying: ‘Go ahead because the Lord is going to give the

enemy into your hands.’ Jehoshaphat is sceptical and asks is there a prophet of the Lord to enquire of? Ahab says, ‘There’s only Michaiah the prophet, but he only tells bad things.’ Michaiah at first pretends to go along with what all the other prophets are saying. Ahab is suspicious at his uncharacteristic behaviour and commands Michaiah to tell the truth. Michaiah says, in effect, ‘Right – you asked for it – here it is. Ahab you will die if you go into battle today.’ And that is what indeed happened. Again, note how Michaiah first intrigues Ahab, and gets him to commit himself, before engaging him with the real message.

Amos uses literary devices to bring home his strong prophetic message against Israel (Amos chs. 1–2), but it doesn’t sound like that at first. He begins – ‘Thus says the LORD: “For three transgressions of Damascus, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment ...”’. A variety of reasons is given as to why Damascus has incurred God’s judgment. Then, ““For three transgressions of Gaza, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment ...”’ Then judgment on Tyre, Edom, Ammon and Moab follow in quick succession. Amos’ readers were probably thinking ‘Yes! These foreign nations are going to get what was coming to them.’ Then, declares Amos, ““*For three transgressions of Judah, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment ...*”’ (and likewise for Israel). His prophetic message is that the chosen people are committing sins as bad as the nations round about, and will incur God’s judgement no less. But to get this over, first Amos draws his hearers in, invites them to concur with God’s judgement, and then turns the judgement on themselves.

Jesus does the same thing, when the Pharisees ask, ‘By what authority are you doing these things?’ (referring to the cleansing of the Temple), Jesus says, ‘Let me ask you a question. John the Baptist’s ministry – was it from heaven or from men?’ The Pharisees are now in a bind. If they say ‘from heaven’, then everyone will ask ‘Why, then, did you not believe him?’ If they say John’s ministry is from men, the people will oppose them because they all held that John was a prophet. The Pharisees, therefore, say ‘We don’t know’, and Jesus replies ‘Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things’ (Matt 21:23–27).



The role of the fool-maker

Os Guinness draws a parallel between the apologist's role with people closed to the gospel message, and the medieval notion of 'the fool'. He distinguishes three types of fool.

1. *The fool proper* – This is the man or woman who says in their heart 'there is no God.' (Psalm 53).
2. *The fool-bearer* – These are people who are fools in the eyes of the world for Christ's sake. The world considers the Gospel to be folly and those who preach it fools, and indeed we would be if the resurrection of Christ was not true, says Paul (1 Cor 15). We bear the name of fool, but in the end God will vindicate our faith in him.
3. *The fool-maker* – This is the fool, familiar in medieval society – the village idiot or the court jester. Because the court jester is regarded as a fool he can say what he likes. He is often the one person who can tell the truth to the king or court. For example, in *Twelfth Night* Shakespeare introduces Olivia, a noble lady in mourning for her dead brother, who will not receive the overtures of the Duke Orsino. Her clown Feste challenges her. Olivia says 'Away with the fool'. Feste replies 'Away with the fool, gentlemen!' gesturing to Olivia herself. 'Why so?' she asks. Feste replies 'Why are you mourning?' 'Because my brother is dead.' 'Then you must think your brother's soul is in hell?' 'No! My brother's soul is in heaven!' 'Well, why are you mourning, then. *Take away the fool!*' The fool is allowed this role as the wise one who plays the fool in order to turn the tables on his hearers.

The basis for understanding is found in Paul's discussion in Romans 1:18 ff. There he talks about people 'holding the truth in unrighteousness' – holding the truth *down* as it were. Knowing the truth but holding it at arm's length – holding half-truths and half-lies in order to justify themselves. In Athens, for example, Paul uses the half-truth of 'the unknown god' to point to the reality of the living God. The imaginative approach of the examples above exposes a basic

tension in all people. If the gospel of Jesus Christ is true, then human beings really are made in God's image. If that is the case but people deny God, they will also deny the reality of His image in themselves. There will, therefore, be a tension between what a person thinks and what that person in reality *is*. Our task may be to find the point of tension, to find where the person's life actually is and in what way the reality of the gospel actually makes them uncomfortable.

We should therefore look for creative ways to reveal to people what they *actually* believe in and the problems of the positions they hold. A word of warning, however: this is not a matter of trying to win an argument or to make people look foolish. Rather, this approach seeks to enable others to discover the truth about themselves for themselves. This is why a parable can be so creative. We go along with the story; we share the world that Jesus creates and suddenly He turns it round, and it's about us. This is the art of working from a shared context towards one that transforms.



Two issues: regarding origins and regarding sin

I will end with a few thoughts on two particular issues I feel I need to address, one about origins and the other about sin. I'll begin with the issue of origins. I said before that the idea that we have to believe in God in order to make sense of the world around us, has for many people been replaced by the idea that science fully explains these matters – especially our origins – perfectly well without God. That simply isn't true. There is a discrepancy between what science *does* have the power to explain (things that are mechanistic) and what it is *perceived* to explain (the meaning of things and what origins are), but does not. Science remains one organised and powerful way of examining data and using the answers gained from this data to describe it. But it has limits. It is a way of knowing that is restricted to *what* can be tested, measured and, in principle, repeated. It tells us a lot of things, but most significantly, it cannot answer the most fundamental questions of life – questions such as: Who am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going? What's the point of life? Why do all those things go wrong in the world? – and indeed: Why does anything exist? – or: Why does science work?

This is because science does not have the tools to address questions like this. Atheistic scientists declaring the non-existence of God are expressing their atheism not their science. Science has nothing to say on the subject. Such questions require other and perfectly valid ways of knowing, as Michael Polanyi pointed out in *Personal Knowledge*,⁴ complementary ways of *knowing*, each telling us different aspects of things. For example, there is the knowledge of the past gained from historical documents. The way we know people is the knowledge gained through personal experience. The claims of the Christian faith rest primarily on these two, more than scientific observation. To claim scientific observation as supreme and write off the others is a wholly unwarranted *philosophical* reductionism, as many indeed have pointed out.

This mechanistic approach is a mistaken claim in Stephen Hawking's recent book *The Grand Design*.⁵ He argues that strange events predicted at the edge of black holes suggest that a 'Big Bang' could be created from a quantum vacuum, without anyone having to 'light the blue touch paper'. He claims that, based on that logic, a Creator is not needed. Various physicists and others, however, have pointed out that this a very special sort of vacuum. Oxford mathematics professor John Lennox comments, 'a quantum vacuum [...] is manifestly not nothing'.⁶ What we normally understand by the word *vacuum* is a space where everything has been sucked out – there is not even air there. Hawking's vacuum is a space defined by initial conditions governed by physical laws, which is almost pregnant for something to happen. Where do these initial conditions and the laws that define them come to exist? All Hawking has done is push the question back. The problem still remains of why physical matter or energy or equations do in fact exist. John Lennox again says, 'A law of nature, by definition, surely depends for its own existence on the prior existence it purports to describe.'⁷ Basically nothing much has changed on this issue. It sounds like he's got a 'knock-down' argument for not needing a Creator any more, we actually have just as much need for a Creator as we always ever have.

The other question, on which I would like to conclude, is sin. One of the most foundational Christian concepts is its view of the human condition; that while human kind is noble, being created in

God's image, we are also profoundly spoiled by our attempts to be autonomous from God. This concept is one that people have great difficulty in hearing, not so much regarding its veracity, but because we haven't given people a basis on which to hear and make sense of the claim, starting from where *they* are.

Part of the problem is the perceptual mountain which needs moving, that Christians claim to be morally better than the prevailing culture and call for everybody else to join them. This needs disabusing. What Jesus Christ says about the human heart is much more radical. If His diagnosis is true, sin is so deep-rooted that it is a problem, as much in believers as anyone else. One should not expect Christians to be 'better', so much as improving only slowly from a bad start. A common view runs like this. If you're 50% righteous you're in; less than 20% righteousness is a fail, but with the chance, perhaps, of a re-sit? Yet, the claim of the gospel is that the pass mark is 100% and we have all failed (Christians included) – except for Jesus himself. We need God's grace in Jesus Christ through His death and resurrection. That's a very radical message to bring. Yet, the radicalism of the traditional Christian message at this point is hugely liberating. Instead of metaphorically wagging a finger and saying 'Aha, you sinner!', Christians can only say, 'I am a sinner and you are too – all of us, in fact.' But, we have a Saviour ... which is good news worth sharing. The best apologetic of all is Jesus Christ Himself.

Notes

- ¹ Ron Ferguson, *Technology at the Crossroads: The Story of the Society, Religion and Technology Project* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1994).
- ² Donald Bruce and Ann Bruce, eds., *Engineering Genesis: The Ethics of Genetic Engineering in Non-human Species* (London: Earthscan, 1998).
- ³ Os Guinness, *The Gravedigger File: Papers on the Subversion of the Modern Church* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1983).

- ⁴ Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).
- ⁵ Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow, *The Grand Design* (London: Bantam Books, 2010).
- ⁶ John C. Lennox, *God and Steven Hawking: Whose Design is it Anyway?* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2011), 30.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.