

A Hermeneutic Response to Apologists and Atheists

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Apologetics is a form of religious proselytizing that attempts to prove the legitimacy of a certain religion or religious text through rational arguments, and this approach to religion has been utilized for hundreds of years. Aquinas’ “Five Ways” stands as one of the most well-known sections of his *Summa Theologica* because of the compact manner in which Aquinas attempts to prove the existence of God from a logical, empiricist argument. Similarly, kalam arguments developed by such prominent Arab philosophers as al-Kindi and Ibn Sina are still regularly used hundreds of years later in attempts to prove that God must exist, and, thus, that one must accept a given holy text. Today, this tradition lives on in the work of apologists—those that try to defend their belief in God through argumentation and reason. Oftentimes, when evangelicals begin a mission of converting others to Christianity, they come prepared

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with stock arguments from this philosophical tradition.¹ When someone asks, why should I believe in God? the answer is provided by a reference to the cosmological argument, the teleological argument, the ontological argument, etc. From the viewpoint of the apologist, not to accept God is more than a lack of faith; it is a lapse in reason. To fail to accept the conclusion of the argument is caused by a lack of understanding of the argument that is being presented.

Interestingly, this style has also led to the rise of what I shall call *refutational atheism*. Under this version of atheism, the reason for rejecting God and the Bible is because arguments from the apologists fall short. According to the claims of the apologists, the Bible is true because its metaphysical arguments are true. Thus, if the arguments are not true, the Bible is not true. The atheist does not think that the arguments are true, so the atheist is not convinced that the Bible is true. This results in competing claims about how best to explain the world, with the apologist arguing that the Bible is the best way to explain the world and the atheist arguing that some other source is the best way to explain the world. We have seen this argument brought explicitly to the debate stage, perhaps most infamously in the Ken Ham/Bill Nye debate about evolution and the creation of the world. The arguments used by Ham and Nye, though drastically different, essentially boil down to the same claim: Believe my side because my side gets the facts of the world right. To believe the other side is to fail to understand and properly assess the argument.

This approach to religion seems rather curious, however. Especially considering that, at the same time that these apologetic arguments are being used, the same communities speak on the importance of faith and “opening one’s heart” to God. These more faith-focused ideas seem to run contrary to the style that is used in apologetic evangelism. Faith is a contentious word in philosophy, but philosophers generally distinguish between accepting an argument on faith and accepting one out of reason. For the apologist, these two sentiments seem to create a tension when they are held together: if the Bible is a work of metaphysics that definitively proves God’s existence rationally, why is any kind of faith necessary in accepting the claims of the Bible? Why would someone need to “open

¹For the purposes of this paper, I will be speaking strictly of attempts to prove the existence of the Christian God, the legitimacy of the Holy Bible, and attempts to convert others to Christianity. This is not to imply that Christianity is the only religion that employs these tactics, but I find it useful to limit the scope of my inquiry to Christian apologetics since it is the dominant form of apologetics in contemporary American society.

their heart” when the apologetic arguments seem to suggest that one needs to accept God by “opening their mind” instead? In my view, this is indicative of a failure to recognize the nature of the holy text and what the Bible is actually presenting. The hermeneutic work of Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Ricoeur provides a thorough demonstration of how the Bible is a fundamentally different kind of text than what is being presented by traditional apologetics. Thus, the arguments between apologists and refutational atheists are doomed to fail because they are operating on grounds that are antithetical to the fact that, as a text, the meaning of the Bible is found in interpretation. The meaning of the text is then not to be found through some strict method of analytic argumentation, but rather through a hermeneutic art that requires a different approach than the one used by both the apologist and the atheist.

In this paper, I shall argue that, following from the work of Bultmann and Ricoeur, traditional apologetic approaches to the Bible fail as they neglect the existential nature of the text and, thus, fail to recognize the decision of the non-believer as legitimate. By the same token, however, the refutational atheist responses to believers fail to recognize the legitimacy of the “yes” answer to *existentiell* decision the Bible poses.² Though it is a difficult position to stake out in current religious discourse, I will conclude by offering a sketch of what it would mean to approach the Bible with the openness that allows for accepting the legitimacy of either answer to the *existentiell* decision of the Bible.

I

The traditional apologetic approach to evangelizing is by providing arguments for the validity of the Bible based on certain rational principles. In effect, the argument goes something like this:

1. The Bible is a book of metaphysical claims.
2. Those metaphysical claims are true.
3. Therefore, the Bible is true.

This line of thinking explains why so many apologists make the “argumentative leap” between accepting certain arguments (e.g., the

²Here, the term “*existentiell* decision” means the answer to the *existentiell* question that arises from the text. The *existentiell* question is simply some claim that the text itself makes that the reader must work to answer within the text itself. More on this in section I.

cosmological argument) and accepting the claims of the Bible. While these arguments do not necessitate specifically believing the Christian Bible or the Christian God, apologists see the Bible as a book that contains these metaphysical claims. Since these metaphysical claims are backed up by outside argumentation, the truth of these claims seems to support the claims of the book as a whole. Thus, the way to convince a non-believer to believe is by proving to them that the claims in the Bible are supported by argumentation (Ricoeur 72-73). If they fail to believe at that point, the problem is a lapse in reason on the part of the atheist.

While this argument may be logically valid, it fails to be sound because of the first premise. To treat the Bible as a list of metaphysical claims is to fundamentally misunderstand the nature of the text. The distinction that must be made here is between what Ricoeur calls *adequation* and *manifestation*. If the Bible were a text of *adequation*, then the text must be adequate to the world; the text must correspond to the world. However, the Bible is a work of *manifestation*. As Ricoeur states, "These documents of faith do not primarily contain theological statements, in the sense of metaphysical speculative theology, but expressions embedded in such modes of discourse as narratives, prophecies, legislative texts, proverbs and wisdom sayings, hymns, prayers, and liturgical formulas. These are the ordinary expressions of religious faith" (Ricoeur 73). In short, the view that the Bible presents itself as a metaphysical book is to deny that it presents itself in a way other than the way that faith ordinarily expresses itself. When my mother, for example, expresses her faith, it is not through a reference to claims like "God is real" or "the universe must have a creator." Rather, my mother expresses her faith in the form of prayer, songs, devotionals, etc. The Bible, for my mother, is true, but not out of a reference to how the text of the Bible corresponds to the world. The Bible is true for her because of the way that these forms of discourse disclose the world to her. The meaning is not found in how the text displays reality but how the text allows for a revelation. This idea is central to Ricoeur's hermeneutic method, and his method is a strong one, as it more accurately represents the way that people actually approach religious texts. Both the apologist and my mother are engaging in a hermeneutic process when they read and interpret the Bible. The apologist just makes the strange move of interpreting the Bible in a unique way that is not reflective of the overall community of believers as a whole. My mother, with her focus on how the text speaks to her and what it means to her, is interacting with the world that is opened up by the text and its unique variety of discourses. In that process, she is bringing with her all of her prejudices, background beliefs, thoughts about the author and their role, and more to the text. This process is the exact kind that Ricoeur imagines as he believes that

the negotiation between the text and the reader comes from finding the new being that is revealed in the text when one brings their prejudices to the text and finds something new from their interpretation of the text. It is useful here to recognize a difference between two kinds of prejudice. A blind prejudice is one in which the hermeneut presupposes the meaning of the text before they even engage with the text. Blind prejudices, therefore, prevent the kind of openness that is necessary for the reader to be critically challenged and shaped by the text. However, non-blind prejudices are the inescapable background assumptions and beliefs that inform the reader's worldview when going into the text. These prejudices are better understood as pre-judgements that shape the horizon of possible interpretations that we can develop as we begin our interpretation. However, the lines of these horizons are constantly being shifted as we engage with the text, meaning that we are continually being challenged by the text and allowing the text to transform our understanding of the world of the text and the broader world outside the text. While we cannot avoid general prejudices (and these are necessary for any kind of interpretation), blind prejudices are antithetical to Ricoeur's vision of hermeneutics, and they actively prevent us from critically engaging with the text. The apologist does not account for any of these factors and, as such, offers a weaker hermeneutic method than Ricoeur.

Furthermore, the apologist's approach to the Bible fails to provide an account of how faith plays a part in one's religious experiences. As Ricoeur shows, when we approach a religious text, a new being (i.e., God) is revealed to us through our interpretation of the text. The decision of whether or not to accept what is shown through revelation is a moment of faith. If the meaning of the text were not to be found between the reader and the text, but instead between the world and the text (as the apologist would believe), faith would have no room in an interpretation of the Bible or in the acceptance of the claims of the Bible. To go into the Bible with the belief that the Bible is true or that Jesus is the Messiah or any other presupposition is to be guided by what Bultmann calls a dogmatic prejudice. An interpretation of the Bible guided by a dogmatic prejudice "does not hear what the text says, but only lets the latter say what it wants to hear" (Bultmann 243). To believe that the Bible "proves faith" is, in a way, a destruction of faith. If the Bible were to "prove" the faith of the apologist, why even call it faith at that point? Faith seems to be the kind of thing that sets itself apart from proof. One does not have faith that two plus two equals four since the principles of mathematics prove that this summation must be true. The apologist treats the Bible in the same way that the mathematician treats the equation, since, in both cases, outside reasoning shows that one must accept the conclusion based on the validity of other principles (either

the Bible or mathematics). However, this approach leaves little room for the faith that most religious folk find integral to their beliefs. To refer back to my mother, faith is integral to her beliefs because the truth of the Bible is found through her personal experience with the Bible. In her words, one must “open their heart” to the Bible. To translate that sentiment into the words of Bultmann, the truth and meaning of the Bible is found through one’s “life-relation” to the text. Bultmann’s “life-relation” is the way that the text speaks to us in our current historical situation and the way that we relate what the text is saying to our current historical understanding within the continuum of effects of history (245). This life-relation is what guides interpretation for Bultmann, since the meaning of historical events “definitively disclose [themselves] only when history has come to an end” (246). Bultmann focuses on the historical situatedness of both the text and the reader. The text is a product of history, and so are we insofar as we are products of the effects of history and our judgements are guided by our current position within history. The fact that both reader and text are products of history, then, means that there is distance between the two, and this distance must be overcome by interpretation in order to arrive at a meaning. Since we approach the text as a historical document from within history itself, the meaning of the text is ever-changing as history marches forward, and the life-relation between one reader and the material in the text will be different than the one between a reader in a different epoch. The apologist, with the belief that the Bible reveals fundamental truths that must be accepted using logical principles, denies the shifting meaning of the text with the movement of history. Thus, the apologist fails to see that the meaning of history is always open and, since the Bible is a historical artifact (as all texts are), its meaning is just as ever-changing as the meaning of history. The meaning of history is not closed, and, thus, neither is the meaning of the Bible.

Now, this does not mean that “anything goes” as far as interpretation of the Bible is concerned. The meaning found in the text cannot be pulled from thin air. If someone were to say, “I applied a Bultmannian analysis to the Bible and I believe it’s about farmers and its meaning is about the necessity of planting corn in horizontal rows,” we could rightfully say that this interpretation is a false interpretation of the Bible. One must find the meaning of the Bible from within the text itself. Textual evidence is the key to interpretation, for our interpretations should always start from within the text itself. This is why Bultmann and Ricoeur offer such powerful interpretive methods; both of their processes focus on going back to the text with a kind of openness that allows the text to speak to us in our historical situation while still acknowledging that it will be guided by our prejudices. Openness requires going into the text “without presupposing

the results of the exegesis” (Bultmann 242). Thus, the process involves a constant *return to the text*, and that return commits us to a hermeneutic circle where our understanding of the text renews a new way of understanding the text, and each reading reveals a new aspect of the text to us. This is the reason that we can still have Biblical experts; we can identify people who have a stronger sense of what the text is saying and that they have done the research necessary to provide key insights into how to read the text. However, even the readings of the experts are not definitive, since, as Bultmann would point out, all interpretation is historical, and the meaning of history is constantly open.

The interesting consequence of a Bultmannian approach to the Bible is the way that it deals with the decision to not believe. For Bultmann, the Bible presents an *existentiell* question for God that must be met with an *existentiell* decision (247). This simply means that the reader is presented with some form of a question and must find an answer within the text. Bultmann suggests that this question can manifest itself in a variety of ways, but, in any case, “the exegete encounters a claim” (247). This prompts the reader to choose “yes” or “no” in deciding whether to accept this claim. Either answer is legitimate since it is an *existentiell* decision. Because Bultmann and Ricoeur find the meaning of the Bible in one’s negotiation with the text, their hermeneutic method can accommodate the fact that either answer to the *existentiell* decision is legitimate. The apologist, with the view that the meaning of the Bible is settled and that it reveals fundamental metaphysical revelations about the world, cannot. For the apologist, to not accept is an illegitimate decision since it involves a lapse in judgement. Far from making the decision meaningless, the fact that there is room for either option in the work of Bultmann and Ricoeur once again points to how faith is experienced at a personal level. Either decision “is not to be refuted by argument” since both are meant to be found from within the text itself and the life-relation of the reader to the text must be central in the answer to that decision (Bultmann 247).

Thus, the apologetic approach to the Bible fails on three fronts. For one, it understands the Bible as a set of metaphysical claims when the religious discourse functions differently as a work of manifestation. Second, the apologetic approach fails since it supposes that the meaning of the text is closed when, because the text is historically situated, the meaning of the Bible is open. This openness of the text leads into the third folly of the apologetic approach: since the meaning is open, it presents an *existentiell* decision to an *existentiell* question. Either answer to the decision is legitimate, but, since the apologist sees the acceptance of the Bible as a matter of reason, it fails to recognize the legitimacy of the “no” answer.

Therefore, the apologetic approach misrepresents how one accepts the Bible and whether one can reject the Bible without violating reason.

II

The apologetic approach to religion also implicates the refutational atheist's approach to religion. To reiterate, the refutational atheist believes that, because the arguments of the apologist do not work, it is reason enough to reject the legitimacy of the Bible. The refutational atheist, then, really just adopts the same framework as the apologist. The only difference is a change in the second premise of the apologetic argument. The refutational atheist believes that the metaphysical claims of the Bible are *not* true and, since the Bible (in this worldview) is a series of metaphysical claims, we have reason for rejecting the Bible on this basis.

What this reveals, then, is that the refutational atheist carries the same baggage as the apologist. By assuming their framework, the atheist also assumes that the Bible is a series of metaphysical claims, that the meaning of the text is closed, and (contra the apologist position) the decision of the *believer* is illegitimate. As has been shown by the arguments in the previous section, each of these positions is ill-founded. The Bible is a text of manifestation, not of adequation, and so it should not be confused with a book that posits merely a list of metaphysical claims. Just like with anything, the Bible requires interpretation, and our historical situation shapes how the text is interpreted. Finally, as a religious text, the Bible presents an open question to which either answer is legitimate.

Just as the apologist is wrong in their treatment of the decision of the atheist, the atheist is also wrong in seeing the "yes" answer to the decision of the Bible as illegitimate. There is a troubling trend amongst atheists to view believers as idiotic, naïve, or irrational. This trend stems from the position that the Bible can be understood objectively and that there is a direct correspondence between the world and the text. When someone accepts this view, a passage like 1st Kings 7:23-36, which suggests that π is equal to exactly three, can be taken as reason to reject the Bible since these claims do not reflect the current world. Instead, the meaning of the text is open to interpretation, and analyzing how this aspect of the Bible fits into the rest of the text is a necessary component to making sense of the Bible as a whole. In the moment that we read this passage, we must engage in the processes that Ricoeur and Bultmann have described for us. We must take this information and return to the text with it, trying to find what the text reveals to us once we put the new information into context with the previous interpretation we had developed. This drives the

hermeneutic circle forward rather than serving as a stopping point because of a perceived metaphysical error. Either answer to the *existentiell* decision of the Bible is legitimate since the decision comes from one's own relation and interpretation of the text, and this interpretation is presupposed to be ongoing in the text with an openness and an interpretative method that constantly refines itself in light of each new interpretation. Thus, the atheist makes the same kind of error as the apologist since both think the other side is making an illegitimate decision when, in reality, "yes" and "no" are both live options.

III

What has been shown is that, while they may seem to be fundamentally opposed to one another, the apologists and the refutational atheists both share the same flawed foundation. In both worldviews, the Bible is an objective text of metaphysical claims and, based on the perceived validity or invalidity of those claims, and each camp believes that the interpretation of the other is illegitimate. This framework implicates both groups in a false understanding of religious texts, the nature of faith, and the *existentiell* nature of the Bible. In short, both assume a blind prejudice about religious texts that limits their ability to approach the Bible with an openness that allows for the world of the text to reveal itself to them and limits the ability for both the apologist and the atheist to have a legitimate understanding of the Bible. Thus, both are limited in making a legitimate decision to the *existentiell* question of the Bible, even if either option is viable.

Given that the refutational atheist and the apologist both fail to engage in the proper hermeneutics of the Bible, how do we perform Bultmannian/Ricoeurian hermeneutics? What are the steps that one must take in order to approach the text without the kind of blind prejudice that clouds both of these groups? A large chunk of this process has been explained throughout this paper, most thoroughly in section I. However, here are quick points that must be considered in order to approach the Bible from a better hermeneutic position than that of the apologist and atheist:

1. The meaning of the Bible must not be thought to be objective and settled; it must be recognized that the meaning of the Bible, as with everything else, is found through interpretation.
2. We must avoid any *blind* prejudice that clouds our interpretation by not assuming what can be found in the text before our reading of the text even begins.

3. Since history has no definitive meaning when analyzed from within history, the “historical picture is falsified only when the exegete takes his pre-understanding as a definitive understanding” (Bultmann 245).

4. Once we’ve considered all of these factors, we must recognize that either answer to the *existentiell* decision is legitimate. As we work to engage the world of the text, we can understand the Bible that legitimately leads us to either acceptance or to non-acceptance of belief in God.

By moving beyond the apologist/refutational atheist framework, we find that Ricoeur and Bultmann both offer a way to interpret the Bible which carries a nuanced, complex, and (in the face of current trends in the discourse) revolutionary approach to religious discourse. Though it is a hard position to take in the current discourse, it is one that is preferable as it acknowledges the reality of faith and how the interpretation of religious texts is meaningfully differentiated from other kinds of interpretations.

Works Cited

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