

1-1-2020

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### Recommended Citation

Hardy, Dean (2020) "Modern Implications for George MacDonald's Nineteenth Century Apologetic," *North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies*: Vol. 39 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.snc.edu/northwind/vol39/iss1/3>

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## Modern Implications for George MacDonald's Nineteenth-Century Apologetic

Dean Hardy

The following is an excerpt from Hardy's book *Waking the Dead: George MacDonald as Philosopher, Mystic, and Apologist* published by Winged Lion Press (2020). Excerpt used by permission.

**T**o inquire of the famous apologists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, one would likely stumble on a list including, but not limited to, William Paley, Alexander B. Bruce, John Henry Newman and Abraham Kuyper; but one would be hard-pressed to find George MacDonald included in a list of these apologists. Usually the only connection MacDonald finds to the realm of apologetics or philosophy is when he is mentioned in the same breath as C.S. Lewis. Otherwise, MacDonald is regarded for his literary efforts, his practical theology, and the rest is ignored. But is there legitimacy for this dismissal from the realm of apologetics?

First and foremost, let us establish our terminology. From Norman Geisler's perspective, "Apologetics is the discipline that deals with a rational defense of Christian faith."<sup>1</sup> Stephen Cowan agrees that "apologetics has to do with the defending, or making a case for, the truth of the Christian faith."<sup>2</sup> While these two definitions seem to lean toward a conflation of apologetics and rationality, others, like Bernard Ramm, have a more general approach: "Christian apologetics is the strategy of setting forth the truthfulness of the Christian faith and its right to the claim of knowledge of God."<sup>3</sup> He even goes so far as to say, "However, not all Christian apologetics come with a clear label . . . whatever deals with truth or with knowledge with respect to the Christian faith is apologetically in scope and content."<sup>4</sup> While Ramm

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1. Norman Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 70.

2. Stephen Cowan, *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. Stephen Cowan (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 8.

3. Bernard Ramm, *Varieties of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1961), 13.

4. *Ibid.*, 13.

goes on to list other genres of books in apologetic nature such as philosophy of religion, philosophical treatises like Kant's *Critiques, and Philosophical Theology*, he never mentions works of fiction, but it is possible that he would have been open to that possibility, as long as those works of fiction were involved in "setting forth the truthfulness of the Christian faith." Hans Frei even goes further in his generality of apologetics: "I have used the term apologetics to cover (among other things) this appeal to a common ground between analysis of human experience by direct natural thought and by some distinctively Christian thought."<sup>5</sup>

Some automatically unite rationality and apologetics, and this is unequivocally an inappropriate conflation of terms. Dr. Geisler, a foremost popular apologist in this present era, used the term "rational" in his definition. While this fact would have to be conceded, it would be a mistake not to call attention to the fact that in Geisler's own encyclopedia of apologetics he has an entry for "experiential apologetics" which is a "form of defending the faith" that does not rely on rational arguments, but instead, "appeals to Christian experience."<sup>6</sup> While Geisler is a critic of such an approach, he does not argue that this method is not apologetics at all, but rather, that it is simply not an effective approach. Thus, we are going to adopt the definition of James Van Eerden who, in his Master's Thesis entitled *An Inquiry into the Use of Human Experience as an Apologetic Tool*, writes, "The task of the apologist is to defend and advance the central tenets of the Christian faith."<sup>7</sup> Apologetics is simply the defense of, and an attempt at clearly articulating the central beliefs of Christianity. While, at this point, one may still question such a label applying to George MacDonald, my book *Waking the Dead: George MacDonald as Philosopher, Mystic, and Apologist* traces the attitude and approaches to apologetics in MacDonald's historical context, as well as defends MacDonald's placement amongst apologetic scholars of such distinction. The article below focuses on the first of these two topics of study.

### **An Overview of Apologetic Strategies during the Nineteenth Century**

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5. Hans W. Frei, "Apologetics, Criticism, and the Loss of Narrative Interpretation" in *Why Narrative? : Readings in Narrative Theology*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 49.

6. Norman Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetic*, 235.

7. James Patrick Van Eerden, *An Inquiry into the Use of Human Experience as an Apologetic Tool: Illustrations from the Writings of George MacDonald, G.K. Chesterton and C.S. Lewis* (Master's Thesis: Grove City College, 1995), 1.

Apologetists “have reasoned their way throughout the centuries, sometimes forcefully and sometimes feebly.”<sup>8</sup> Every era has its apologetic character and epistemic focus, and the eighteenth century was dominated by an appeal to rationalism and the primacy of science and reason. The Christian apologetists during this era focused on “two basic theistic proofs: the argument from miracle and prophecy and the argument from design.”<sup>9</sup> As will be seen below, this method was “highly scrutinized and came under severe attack by thinkers who were themselves committed to the ideals and scientific methods of the Age of Reason.”<sup>10</sup> Even modern philosophical historians have disdain for such an era: “Like the Temple of Reason in Notre Dame de Paris, the popularity of the cult of reason was relatively short-lived.”<sup>11</sup>

It would be an easy task simply to paint the nineteenth century apologetists as reacting to this rational approach, but the fact of the matter is that this era was a tug-of-war between the traditional rationalist approach on one side and the Romantics and skeptics on the other. Hans Frei points out that this was not an anomaly, but rather, this has happened quite often in the history of apologetics and theology: “Modern mediating theology gives an impression of constantly building, tearing down, rebuilding, and tearing down again the same edifice. Notable instances of this procedure are the revolt of nineteenth-century Christian liberals against the ‘evidence’—seeking theology of the eighteenth century, the revolt of the so-called dialectical or neo-orthodox theologians against nineteenth-century liberalism in the 1920s, and contemporary arguments in favor of the meaningfulness of a specific Christian ‘language game’ among all the other language games people play.”<sup>12</sup> To make the point clear, and before we continue into specific apologetists and Christian theologians in the nineteenth century, all one would have to do is contrast the work of two prominent thinkers at the turn of the century. Friedrich Schleiermacher believed that theological “truth was now to be found in the symbolic rendering of the experiences of the life of feelings”<sup>13</sup> and was famous for “deemphasizing the fatal falseness of our reasons and passions.”<sup>14</sup> Schleiermacher elevated subjective experience

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8. *Ibid.*, 1.

9. James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought Vol. 1: The Enlightenment and the Nineteenth Century* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997), 50.

10. *Ibid.*, 83.

11. *Ibid.*, 400.

12. Hans W. Frei, “Apologetics, Criticism, and the Loss of Narrative Interpretation,” 49.

13. James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, 105.

14. Nicola Hoggard Creegan, “Schleiermacher as apologist: Reclaiming the Father of Modern

and diminished the cognitive faculties. In contrast, William Paley argued that knowledge of God could be found through our senses and rational faculties. In his *Natural Theology and Tracts* in 1802, he writes:

The existence, the agency, the wisdom, of the Deity, could be testified to his rational creatures. This is the scale by which we ascend to all the knowledge of our Creator which we possess, so far as it depends upon the phenomena, or the works of nature. Take away this, and you take away from us every subject of observation, and ground of reasoning; I mean as our rational faculties are formed at present. Whatever is done, God could have done without the intervention of instruments or means; but it is in the construction of instruments, in the choice and adaptation of means, that a creative intelligence is seen.<sup>15</sup>

During this time period, “religion and science were in mutual support. And such continued to be the prevalent view in the opening years of the nineteenth century, when the writings of William Paley in this country were at the height of their popularity. . . . The scientific spirit now permeated thought in all its ranges,” but as science began to take a larger grip on the minds of the populace, “the appeal to natural phenomena in evidence of the divine existence and attributes began to lose its former cogency.”<sup>16</sup> In fact, to some, including those who will be discussed later, Paley’s arguments became regarded as “frigid and unpersuasive.”<sup>17</sup>

Thus, the apologetic spirit of the nineteenth century was not homogenous, but it was within this conflict and metaphorical tug-of-war where MacDonald’s life and work was positioned. Even more specifically, in the midpoint of MacDonald’s career, there was heightened conflict in the arena of apologetics: “A clash between religious beliefs and scientific theory was thus inevitable: first, on the question of the Genesis story of the creation, then on Darwinism, especially as propounded by T.H. Huxley, whose respect for the susceptibilities of theologians was minimal, and finally on the doctrine of materialism generally, a philosophy destructive of all spiritual values. The issue of science versus religion was most prominent from about 1860

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Theology” in *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World*, ed. by Timothy R. Phillips & Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 60.

15. William Paley, *Natural Theology and Tracts* (New York: S. King, 1824), 31.

16. Bernard M.G. Reardon, *Religious Thought in the Victorian Age: A Survey from Coleridge to Gore* (New York: Longman, 1995), 210-211.

17. *Ibid.*, 3.

to 1880, when both sides were in the mood for conflict, the theologians from an authoritarian confidence whetted by fear, the scientists (or their publicists) from an exhilaration born of achievements.”<sup>18</sup> In the midst of that chaos, MacDonald wrote *Weighed and Wanting* in which he had his protagonist state, “I should be the last to encourage the atheism that is getting so frightfully common, but really it seems to me such extravagant notions about religion as you have been brought up in must have not a little to do with the present sad state of affairs—must in fact go far to make atheists.”<sup>19</sup> MacDonald thought that the staunch Calvinism and the rationalistic apologetics that permeated his culture often had ill effect upon the very laymen that they were supposed to be helping. As a prophet’s dissonant voice in the wilderness calls for change, so was the voice of François-René de Chateaubriand in 1802.

Chateaubriand’s *Le Genie du Christianisme*, or, the *Genius of Christianity* “published in the spring of 1802, marked the beginning of a new style in apologetics. Philosophically null, it disclosed all the same and emotional thirst for religions which only the living imagination could satisfy.”<sup>20</sup> He “initiated a new apologetics that looked to the beauty and to the cultural institutions of the past that were, he argued, the achievement of the Catholic genius. The Traditionalists turned away from abstract argument and appealed, rather, to the ‘givenness’ of a primal divine revelation, passed on over the centuries . . .”<sup>21</sup> This work marked a turning of the tide in nineteenth century apologetics. He saw the issues in modern apologetics, noted them, and cast them aside to take on a new direction: “The defenders of the Christians fell into an error which had before undone them: they did not perceive that the question was no longer to discuss this or that particular tenet since the very foundation on which these tenets were built was rejected by their opponents. By starting from the mission of Jesus Christ, and descending from one consequence to another, they established the truths of faith on a solid basis; but this mode of reasoning, which might have suited the seventeenth century extremely well, when the groundwork was not contested, proved of no use in our days.”<sup>22</sup> The following excerpt explains

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18. *Ibid.*, 10.

19. George MacDonald, *Weighed and Wanting*, 481.

20. Bernard M.G. Reardon, *Religious Thought in the Victorian Age*, 7.

21. James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, 356.

22. François-René Chateaubriand, *The Genius of Christianity; or the Spirit and Beauty of the Christian Religion*, translated by Charles I. White (Philadelphia: John Murphy & Co., 1884), 48.

Chateaubriand's commitment to rejecting the old, and embarking on new avenues of demonstration of the truth of the Christian faith:

It was, therefore, necessary to prove that, on the contrary, the Christian religion, of all the religions that ever existed, is the most humane, the most favorable to liberty and to the arts and sciences; that the modern world is indebted to it for every improvement, from agriculture to the abstract sciences—from the hospitals for the reception of the unfortunate to the temples reared by the Michael Angelo's and embellished by the Raphael's. It was necessary to prove that nothing is more divine than its morality—nothing more lovely and more sublime than its tenets, its doctrine, and its worship; that it encourages genius, corrects the taste, develops the virtuous passions, imparts energy to the ideas, presents noble images to the writer, and perfect models to the artist; that there is no disgrace in being believers with Newton and Bossuet, with Pascal and Racine. In a word, it was necessary to summon all the charms of the imagination, and all the interests of the heart, to the assistance of that religion against which they had been set in array.

The reader may now have clear view of the object of our work. All other kinds of apologies are exhausted, and perhaps they would be useless at the present day. Who would now sit down to read work professedly theological? Possibly few sincere Christians who are already convinced. But, it may be asked, may there not be some danger in considering religion in merely human point of view? Why so? Does our religion shrink from the light? Surely one great proof of its divine origin is, that it will bear the test of the fullest and severest scrutiny of reason. Would you have us always open to the reproach of enveloping our tenets in sacred obscurity, lest their falsehood should be detected? Will Christianity be the less true for appearing the more beautiful? Let us banish our weak apprehensions; let us not, by an excess of religion, leave religion to perish. We no longer live in those times when you might say, 'Believe without inquiring.' People will inquire in spite of us; and our timid silence, in heightening the triumph of the infidel, will diminish the number of believers. It is time that the world should know to what all those charges of absurdity, vulgarity, and meanness, that are daily alleged against Christianity, may be reduced. It is time to demonstrate, that, instead of debasing the ideas, it encourages the soul to take the most daring

flights, and is capable of enchanting the imagination as divinely as the deities of Homer and Virgil. Our arguments will at least have this advantage, that they will be intelligible to the world at large, and will require nothing but common sense to determine their weight and strength. In works of this kind authors neglect, perhaps rather too much, to speak the language of their readers. It is necessary to be scholar with scholar, and poet with poet. The Almighty does not forbid us to tread the flowery path, if it serves to lead the wanderer once more to him; nor is it always by the steep and rugged mountain that the lost sheep finds its way back to the fold.<sup>23</sup>

Chateaubriand started on this journey focused on the positive and beautiful attributes of Christianity, and his insistence on limiting the usage of metaphysical proofs: “Adhering scrupulously to our plan, we shall banish all abstract ideas from our proofs of the existence of God and the immortality of the soul, and shall employ only such arguments as may be derived from poetical and sentimental considerations, or, in other words, from the wonders of nature and the moral feelings.”<sup>24</sup> Again, he remarks with specificity: “Without entering too deeply into metaphysical proofs, which we have studiously avoided, we shall nevertheless endeavor to answer certain objections which are incessantly brought forward.”<sup>25</sup> As stated in the extended excerpt above, he thought that to expect a non-believer to sit down and read a theological text would be unlikely, and even if this were to take place, it would be unconvincing. But to throw out reason would be to throw out the baby with the bathwater. For Christianity should be able to “bear the test of the fullest and severest scrutiny of reason.”<sup>26</sup>

While Livingston states that Chateaubriand “considered the rationalistic arguments of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—regarding such matters as revelation, miracles, and God—to be exhausted—and useless,”<sup>27</sup> and although there is truth to this claim, it is a slight overstatement. For even while Chateaubriand claimed to repudiate these proofs he stated the following: “To complete what we have said on the existence of God and the immortality of the soul, we shall here present the

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23. François-René Chateaubriand, *The Genius of Christianity; or the Spirit and Beauty of the Christian Religion*, 46-50.

24. *Ibid.*, 138.

25. *Ibid.*, 191.

26. *Ibid.*, 49.

27. James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, 144.



metaphysical proofs of these truths."<sup>28</sup> After which, Chateaubriand makes an end note and lists metaphysical proofs as an addendum to his work. If these were completely useless, why list them as a supplement? To digress, the sentiment that Chateaubriand sought to reduce the usage of metaphysical proofs, and in order to appeal to the common sense and the beauty in man, still holds. For an example of his style of argument, take his version of the teleological argument, with some suggestion of the anthropic principle:

We cannot conceive what scene of confusion nature would present if it were abandoned to the sole movements of matter. The clouds, obedient to the laws of gravity, would fall perpendicularly upon the earth, or ascend in pyramids into the air; moment afterward the atmosphere would be too dense or too rarefied for the organs of respiration. The moon, either too near or too distant, would at one time be invisible, at another would appear bloody and covered with enormous spots, or would alone fill the whole celestial concave with her disproportionate orb. Seized, as it were, with strange kind of madness, she would pass from one eclipse to another, or, rolling from side to side, would exhibit that portion of her surface which earth has never yet beheld. The stars would appear to be under the influence of the same capricious power; and nothing would be seen but succession of tremendous conjunctions. One of the summer signs would be speedily overtaken by one of the signs of winter; the Cowherd would lead the Pleiades, and the Lion would roar in Aquarius; here the stars would dart along with the rapidity of lightning, there they would be suspended motionless; sometimes, crowding together in groups, they would form new galaxy; at others, disappearing all at once, and, to use the expression of Tertullian, reading the curtain of the universe, they would expose to view the abysses of eternity.<sup>29</sup>

Note that, for Chateaubriand, poetic style coexists with substance. He makes no metaphysical connections, no abstract reasoning; he merely encourages the reader, in expressive fashion, to ponder the universe and contemplate its obvious order and dependence on a divine coordinator. While there is no evidence of an interaction between this Frenchman and MacDonald, it will be demonstrated that they both had a similar distaste for

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28. François-René Chateaubriand, *The Genius of Christianity; or the Spirit and Beauty of the Christian Religion*, 695.

29. François-René Chateaubriand, *The Genius of Christianity; or the Spirit and Beauty of the Christian Religion*, 140-141.

mere metaphysical argumentation, thus independently reflecting an aspect of the spirit of the times, and both had an imaginative-apologetic style.

Of all of the Christian thinkers, theologians, and apologists in this brief survey of the apologetic landscape in the nineteenth century, Coleridge is the one with the strongest connection to George MacDonald.<sup>30</sup> Not only is he often mentioned in MacDonald's works, but MacDonald calls him a "sage" and is said to have opened Wordsworth's eyes "to such visions"; he even goes so far as to say that "the ecstasy is even loftier in Coleridge than in Wordsworth."<sup>31</sup> Thus it is not an exaggeration to suggest that he held Coleridge's perspective and literary prowess in high regard.

Similarly to other Romantics during this era, Coleridge limited the impact of rationalistic arguments and, instead, focused on the imagination. Coleridge's system of thought was an exemplar of his era. In the age of Coleridge, "reason was quickened, sometimes indeed superseded, by imagination . . . the knowledge of truth, for the Romantic mind, was a visionary experience, an intuition or immediate beholding. But vision, intuition, is of its very nature subjective proof. External proof is irrelevant, even alien to it."<sup>32</sup>

Coleridge himself explains his disdain for the focus on rationalistic argumentation and evidence: "I more than fear, the prevailing taste for Books of Natural Theology, Physico-theology, Demonstrations of God from Nature, *Evidences* of Christianity, and the like. *Evidences* of Christianity! I am weary of the Word. Make a man feel the *want* of it; rouse him, if you can, to the self-knowledge of his *need* of it; and you may safely trust it to its own Evidence—remembering only the express declaration of Christ himself: No man cometh to me, unless the Father leadeth him!"<sup>33</sup> As will be explored later, this analogy of waking, or rousing the lost sleeper sounds profoundly similar to MacDonald's own words: "Let the dead bury their dead, and the dead teach their dead; for me, I will try to wake them."<sup>34</sup>

Unfortunately for Coleridge, similarly to how Chateaubriand was treated above, many proof-text his statements, and conclude that he was completely anti-rationalistic. Note Reardon's assessment: "Current religious

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30. Gisela H. Kreglinger, "Reading Scripture in Crisis: The Victorian Crisis of Faith and MacDonald's Response to Coleridge," 81.

31. George MacDonald, *England's Antiphon*, 307.

32. Bernard M.G. Reardon, *Religious Thought in the Victorian Age*, 7.

33. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection*. (London: Hurst, Chance & Company, 2nd edition, 1831), 399. *Collected Works of STC* 9 ed. John Beer, 405-6.

34. George MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons*, "Righteousness," 268.

discussion, in so far as it ventured upon philosophical problems at all, fastened on the 'evidences' of Christianity, chiefly in an attempt to refuse the skeptic Hume. Coleridge's aim was to break entirely with these arid and unconvincing methods . . . For not only was evidence-theology useless—ineffectual for its own end; it was also false in principle. Its procedure was purely rationalistic and made no appeal to religious feeling. To the believer external evidences are unnecessary: he builds his faith on other grounds; whilst the philosophically minded unbeliever they rest on a mistaken premise. The reader Coleridge sought to address was the intelligent doubter, especially if he were among the young, whom the conventional arguments left untouched."<sup>35</sup> Reardon seems to argue that Coleridge was completely anti-rationalistic, and if we were to take the Coleridge passage above and extract it from the rest of his work, it would be easy to arrive at this conclusion, but as we see below, in an excerpt from the same work by Coleridge quoted above, this is not completely the case:

Do I then utterly exclude the speculative Reason from Theology? No! It is its office and rightful privilege to determine on the *negative* truth of whatever we are required to believe. The doctrine must not *contradict* any universal principle: for this would be a Doctrine that contradicted itself. Or Philosophy? No. It may be and has been the servant and pioneer of Faith by convincing the mind, that a doctrine is cogitable, that the soul can present the *Idea* to itself; and that *if* we determine to contemplate, or *think* of, the subject at all, so and in no other form can this be effected. So far are both Logic and Philosophy to be received and trusted. But the *duty*, and in some cases and for some persons even the *right*, of thinking on subjects beyond the bounds of sensible experience; the grounds of the *Real* truth; the *Life*, the *Substance*, the *Hope*, the *Love*, in one word, the *Faith*;—these are derivatives from the practical, moral, and spiritual Nature and Being of Man.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, for Coleridge, as for Chateaubriand, logic, philosophy, and even apologetics have their place, but not in the heightened state in which the spirit of the prior age had elevated them. In the same way that MacDonald had been charged with being “anti-science,” so have these Romantic writers been charged with “anti-rationalism,” when these thinkers seem merely trying to take rationalism and science off of the pedestal on which they have been

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35. Bernard M.G. Reardon, *Religious Thought in the Victorian Age*, 46-47.

36. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection*, 177. Collected Works 9, 188.

erected, lowering them to a more humble position of priority. While there is some incongruity among historians on Coleridge's own words, there is no doubt that Coleridge himself "was a man for whom any rationale of faith must be made in essentially personal terms . . . It was something which every man must work out for himself."<sup>37</sup>

With Coleridge being the last of the Romantics we will cover in this section, it should be pointed out that the theme of most nineteenth century Romantics, and with MacDonald as well, was to find a more holistic approach to evidence, apologetics, and faith itself. Some may assume that the impact of the nineteenth century apologetic landscape is most notably a rejection of rationalism, but this would be an overstatement: "It would be quite wrong . . . to envision the Romantic Movement as simply the repudiation of the Age of Reason. Rather, the Romantics strove to enlarge the vision of the eighteenth-century and to return to a wider, more richly diversified tradition."<sup>38</sup> They simply were "unwilling to reduce experience either to an abstract rationalism or a narrow, scientific empiricism. Experience involved much that eluded both analytical reasoning and scientific experiment, including the power of imagination, feeling, and intuition."<sup>39</sup>

John Henry Newman, Anglican priest and theologian, published his *Sermons, Chiefly on the Theory of Religious Belief* in 1844. He also had a disdain for rationalistic evidence. James C. Livingston even argued that Newman found Paley's arguments "repellant," the problem with this style of apologetics being that it attempted "to prove Christianity independently of the grace of faith . . . religious faith and truth may on occasion be justified by reason, but reason never can produce faith. Religious knowledge arises from moral obedience, out of hunger and thirst after righteousness."<sup>40</sup> Newman did not attempt to make an analysis of the change in apologetic styles over the two centuries, but did allow himself to make this argument:

I have not here to make any formal comparison of the last century with the present, or to say whether they are nearer the truth, who in these matters advance with the present age, or who loiter behind with the preceding. I will only state what seems to me meant when persons disparage the Evidences,—viz. they consider that, as a

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37. Bernard M.G. Reardon, *Religious Thought in the Victorian Age*, 52.

38. James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, 83.

39. *Ibid.*, 84.

40. James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, 176.

general rule, religious minds embrace the Gospel mainly on the great antecedent probability of a revelation, and the suitableness of the Gospel to their needs; on the other hand, that on men of irreligious minds Evidences are thrown away. Further, they perhaps would say, that to insist much on matters which are for the most part so useless for any practical purpose, draw men away from the true view of Christianity, and leads them to think that Faith is mainly the result of argument, that religious Truth is a legitimate matter of disputation, and that they who reject it rather err in judgment than commit sin. They think they see in the study in question a tendency to betray the sacredness and dignity of Religion, when those who profess themselves its champions allow themselves to stand on the same ground as philosophers of the world, admit the same principles, and only aim at drawing different conclusions. For is not this the error, the common and fatal error, of the world, to think itself a judge of Religious Truth without preparation of heart?<sup>41</sup>

As discussed in other areas of the book, MacDonald realized that without the person being a true person, no argument would shake his already-held belief. In Newman's words, there has to be a "preparation of heart" in order for these evidences to root into one's cognitive soil. Even if there was evidence that would change one's mind, it likely would not end in saving faith: "I do but say that it is antecedent probability that gives meaning to those arguments from fact which are commonly called the Evidences of Revelation; that, whereas mere probability proves nothing, mere facts persuade no one; that probability is to fact, as the soul to the body; that mere presumptions may have no force, but that mere facts have no warmth. A mutilated and defective evidence suffices for persuasion where the heart is alive; but dead evidences, however perfect, can but create a dead faith."<sup>42</sup> In Newman's mind, the evidences that might produce belief would only produce mere belief and not saving faith, nor a relationship with the living God.

In the same vein as Chateaubriand, Newman did not completely disregard rationalistic evidences; he found that they could have their place among the laity and Christian scholars alike:

Yet, serious as these dangers may be, it does not therefore follow that the Evidences may not be of great service to persons in particular

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41. John Henry Newman, *Sermons, Chiefly on the Theory of Religious Belief: Preached Before the University of Oxford* (London: Francis and John Rivington, 1844), 189-190.

42. John Henry Newman, *Sermons, Chiefly on the Theory of Religious Belief*, 191-192.

frames of mind. Careless persons may be startled by them as they might be startled by a miracle, which is no necessary condition of believing, notwithstanding. Again, they often serve as a test of honesty of mind; their rejection being the condemnation of unbelievers. Again, religious persons sometimes get perplexed and lose their way; are harassed by objections; see difficulties which they cannot surmount; are a prey to subtlety of mind or over-anxiety. Under these circumstances the varied proofs of Christianity will be a stay, a refuge, an encouragement, a rallying point for Faith, a gracious economy; and even in the case of the most established Christian are they a source of gratitude and reverent admiration, and a means of confirming faith and hope.<sup>43</sup>

Thus, Newman saw rational arguments as potential discipleship material, or possibly used as an uplifting devotional; but needless to say, he did not find them useful for evangelistic means.

Charles Hodge was a Presbyterian and Calvinist who taught at Princeton for fifty-eight years and “is the person most associated with and representative of the Princeton Theology.”<sup>44</sup> He published multiple works, but the one with substantial apologetics content was his *Systematic Theology*, first published in 1865. Of the nineteenth-century thinkers mentioned earlier, Hodge would be most aligned with Paley’s apologetic approach, and he even suggested Paley’s *Natural Theology* to his readers as a good demonstration that God uses the physical world to proclaim his existence and his glory.<sup>45</sup> Hodge, who held his position at Princeton through much of the century, noticed the trend in apologetics to demean the rationalistic arguments and reacted thus: “The arguments are not designed so much to prove the existence of an unknown being, as to demonstrate that the Being who reveals himself to man in the very constitution of his nature must be all that Theism declares him to be. Such writers as Hume, Kant, Coleridge, and the whole school of transcendental philosophers, have more or less expressly denied the validity of the ordinary arguments for the existence of a personal God.”<sup>46</sup>

He did not succumb to this cultural pressure, but instead doubled down on the traditional approach. He argued: “The existence of God is an

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43. *Ibid.*, 191.

44. James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, 304.

45. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribers and Company, 1872), 25.

46. *Ibid.*, 202.

objective fact. It may be shown that it is a fact which cannot be rationally denied. Although all men have feelings and convictions which necessitate the assumption that there is a God; it is, nevertheless, perfectly legitimate to show that there are other facts which necessarily lead to the same conclusion."<sup>47</sup> Hodge did not merely defend Natural Theology but even rationalism itself, and argued the classical arguments for God's existence. Thus, even in the midst of the nineteenth century and the reaction against rationalism from the skeptics and Romantics alike, there were those who still held to traditional, rational apologetics.

Alexander Balmain Bruce (1831-99), who was the professor of Apologetics and New Testament exegesis at Free Church Hall, had a unique view. Reardon argued that "Apologetics was necessary—and Bruce himself was the author of a well-known treatise thereon—but he despaired of any successful defense of traditionalist positions. The apologist's proper task is to present the Christianity of Christ himself, in the assurance that its intrinsic worth must convince any man of good will."<sup>48</sup> In his *Apologetics: or, Christianity Defensively Stated* Bruce wrote:

When one considers the facts connected with the history of theistic evidence: how few arguments command the general assent even of theists, how much the line of proof adopted depends on the advocate's philosophic viewpoint, and how little respect the rival schools of philosophy pay to all methods of establishing the common faith but their own, he is tempted to think that that faith is without sure foundation, and that the agnostic is right when he asserts that knowledge of God is unattainable. But there is another way of looking at the matter which deserves serious attention. While differing as to what proofs are valid and valuable, all theists are agreed as to the thing to be proved: that God is, and to a certain extent what God is. This harmony in belief ought to weigh more in our judgment than the variation in evidence. It suggests the thought that the belief in God is antecedent to evidence, and that in our theistic reasonings we formulate proof of a foregone conclusion innate and inevitable. How otherwise can it be explained that men who have demolished what have passed for the strongest arguments for the theistic creed are not content to be done with it, but hold on to the conviction that God is, on grounds which to all others

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47. *Ibid.*, 203.

48. Bernard M.G. Reardon, *Religious Thought in the Victorian Age*, 313.



but themselves appear weak and whimsical? Thus a recent writer, after searching in vain the whole universe of matter and of mind for traces of Deity, finds rest at last for his weary spirit in this train of thought: There is such a thing as error, but error is inconceivable unless there be such a thing as truth, and truth is inconceivable unless there be a seat of truth, an infinite all-including Thought or Mind, therefore such a Mind exists. That Mind is God, the “infinite Seer,” whose nature it is to think, not to act. “No power it is to be resisted, no plan-maker to be foiled by fallen angels, nothing finite, nothing striving, seeking, losing, altering, growing weary; the All-Enfolder it is, and we know its name. Not Heart, nor Love, though these also are in it and of it; Thought it is, and all things are for Thought, and in it we live and move.” How weak the proof here, but how strong the conviction! So it is, more or less, with us all. In our formal argumentation we feebly and blunderingly try to assign reasons for a belief that is rooted in our being. In perusing works by others devoted to the advocacy of theism, we are conscious of disappointment, and possibly even of doubt suggested rather than of faith established, only to recover serene and strong conviction when the book is forgotten. It would seem as if the way of wisdom were to abstain from all attempts at proving the divine existence, and, assuming as a *datum* that God is, to restrict our inquiries to *what* He is.<sup>49</sup>

To those uninitiated in the thought of Bruce, it would likely seem that he was at once supporting and denouncing the apologetic method. Once one understands the limited intention and role he ascribed to apologetics, the argument becomes clear:

Apologetic [sic], then, as I conceive it, is a preparer of the way of faith, an aid to faith against doubts whencesoever arising, especially such as are engendered by philosophy and science. Its specific aim is to help men of ingenuous spirit who, while assailed by such doubts, are morally in sympathy with believers. It addresses itself to such as are drawn in two directions, towards and away from Christ, as distinct from such as are confirmed either in unbelief or in faith. Defence presupposes a foe, but the foe is not the dogmatic infidel who has finally made up his mind that Christianity is a delusion, but

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49. Alexander Balmain Bruce, *Apologetics; or, Christianity Definitely Stated* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1892), 157-158.



anti-Christian thought in the believing man's own heart.<sup>50</sup>

Thus, in Bruce's mind, the apologetic arguments can be helpful, and indeed, he made strides to produce his own, but these were not geared to convert the staunch nonbeliever. Apologetics appeals to those who have a "moral sympathy" with Christians, or those men and women who have doubts that arise in their minds. Thus, for Bruce, apologetics was not as much pre-evangelism, even though there is an element of that, but it normatively took a form of defensive discipleship.

For Christian thought and apologetics in the nineteenth century, the conflict between the traditional, rationalistic approach, and the romantic, experiential approach came to a pinnacle. The prior age "was to suppose that the understanding is competent to treat of what belongs to the sphere of reason . . . [they] had reduced spiritual religion to mere rationalism."<sup>51</sup> Thus, while some stayed firmly planted in this mindset and it is a mistake to over-simplify to the contrary, others found their evidences not in external arguments and scientific facts, but rather an "inner witness of moral feeling and perception."<sup>52</sup> To determine whether this had beneficial or detrimental consequences is not the intention of this study, but rather, to demonstrate and survey the current apologetic milieu in which George MacDonald lived, reasoned, and wrote.

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50. Alexander Balmain Bruce, *Apologetics; or, Christianity Definitely Stated*, 37.

51. Bernard M.G. Reardon, *Religious Thought in the Victorian Age*, 49.

52. Bernard M.G. Reardon, *Religious Thought in the Victorian Age*, 233.

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