POSTMODERNISM AND THE NEED FOR RATIONAL APOLOGETICS IN A POST-CONCILIAR CHURCH

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The traditional conception of truth as an absolute, objective, and universal description of reality has undergone a radical reinterpretation in the West. Truth is no longer seen as a goal worthy to be pursued in and of itself, but is instead understood as something inseparable from politics, culture, psychology, biology, race, and gender. In this postmodern view of truth, reality is determined by individuals, not discovered by them. As Richard Rorty opines: ‘Truth is made rather than found’. Although it is difficult to define postmodernism, the movement is characterized by (1) the affirmation of radical and irreducible pluralism; (2) the rejection of unifying metaphysical or religious claims; and (3) suspicion toward binary categories that characterizes different regions of thought or ontological realities.

Negatively speaking, postmodernism is a type of relativism. In this view, truth, linguistic meaning, moral values, and human nature no longer have stable meanings. Since there is no overarching story to guide individuals with this type of relativism in the background, postmodernism is also characterized by ‘incredulity toward meta-narratives’. This radical pluralism makes it difficult to have a unified view of the world under the banner of Catholic Christianity. Worse, theologians seem to have absorbed this same understanding of truth in their reflections on divine revelation. As Avery Dulles suggests: ‘Theology, for its part, all too often evades the challenge of truth. Falling into fideism or sheer positivism, many theologians limit themselves to sociological, linguistic, and historical studies of the Bible and Church teaching’.

As a result of the paradigm shift from modernism to postmodernism, the unifying claims of the Church no longer appear true and binding on all persons. The implication is that there is no reason to be Catholic. What is thus needed in a post-conciliar apologetics is a robust response to postmodern relativism and its impact on the discipline of apologetics. Some apologists avoid the question of truth, opting for some other means of persuasion such as moral goodness. Others resort to arguments that assume truth is correspondence with reality. Hence, in this essay I will address the challenge of anti-realism, showing its incoherence so as to reestablish the importance of rational apologetics; for it would not make sense for rational apologists to make arguments and present evidence for the faith unless the doctrinal positions they think are provable or ‘more probable than not’, are construed as legitimate claims to truth in the first place.

I. THE DEMISE OF TRUTH

Professor Allan Bloom is no stranger to our current cultural malaise. Surveying the landscape of higher education in the 1980s, Bloom wrote that
There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative. If this belief is put to the test, one can count on the students’ reaction: they will be uncomprehending. . . . The danger they have been taught to fear from absolutism is not error but intolerance. Relativism is necessary to openness; and this is the virtue, the only virtue, which all primary education for more than fifty years has dedicated itself to inculcating. Openness – and the relativism that makes it the only plausible stance in the face of various claims to truth and various ways of life and kinds of human beings – is the great insight of our times. . . . The study of history and of culture teaches that all the world was made in the past; men always thought they were right, and that led to wars, persecutions, slavery, xenophobia, racism, and chauvinism. The point is not to correct the mistakes and really be right; rather it is not to think you are right at all.5

Bloom’s book has not lost any of its relevance in today’s cultural milieu. The decline of truth is occurring not only in the academy, but is found everywhere in popular culture. The denial of objective truth is usually assumed rather than argued for by the ordinary person. Cheap slogans such as ‘true for you, but not for me!’ run rampant in the culture of postmodernity. Like most revolutions in human thinking, the emergence of postmodernism did not creep into Western culture overnight, but can be traced back to the fact/value split of such Enlightenment philosophers as Immanuel Kant (1724–1804).6 He combined skepticism about metaphysical knowledge with an optimistic outlook that held that universal, necessary (a priori) knowledge of the conditions of experience was still possible, thus saving science. This severance of fact from deeper meaning made it easier for persons to become leery about truth claims, especially metaphysical claims. Whether such claims are made in the name of religion or not, objective truths are generally regarded with suspicion and are interpreted as expressions of subjective preference. As John Caputo writes: ‘Each thing has its own drive or local force – its “perspective” – and the world is a multiplicity of competing perspectives. Ideas have not “truth” but “value,” that is, an effectiveness that is measured by their capacity to enhance life’.7

The Kantian divorce of fact from meaning eventually culminated in the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900),8 a forerunner and prophet of postmodernism. In his words: ‘What then is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms – in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people; truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their picture and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins’.9 Indeed, for Nietzsche, ‘There are no facts, only interpretations’.10 Michel Foucault explains the origins of his reasoning: ‘Why does Nietzsche challenge the pursuit of the origin (Ursprung) . . .? First, because it is an attempt to capture the exact essence of things, . . . because this search assumes the existence of immobile forms that precede the eternal world of accident and succession. . . . However, . . . there is “something altogether different” behind things: not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence’ (emphasis mine).11 For Nietzsche, the universal naming of objects does not arise out of recognizing actual essences in reality.

As an extension of Kant’s distinction between the noumenal and phenomenal worlds, Foucault maintains that human judgments about the world are first filtered through psychological, cultural and historical contingencies, leaving little room for metaphysics.12 It thus becomes impossible to achieve knowledge of the world as it is. For example Richard Rorty claims: ‘there is nothing deep down inside us except what we have put there ourselves, no criterion that we have not created in the course of creating a practice, no
standard of rationality that is not an appeal to such a criterion, no rigorous argumentation that is not obedience to our own conventions'.

The postmodern rejection of universals also has an impact on the possibility of interpersonal communication. Because words do not have referents, language loses its power to make definitive statements and is no longer capable of persuading others. Written texts no longer refer to reality when metaphysical truths (such as human nature) are illusory. Some thinkers such as Ferdinand de Saussure and Roman Jakobsen claim that texts must be released from an objective message that readers can somehow discover for themselves. Every text can be shown to be ambiguous. The original meaning the author placed in her or his writing does not limit the reader’s understanding of what is written. Every reader therefore imposes their own meaning upon the text. In Jacques Derrida’s words: ‘Those who wish to ground solidarity in objectivity . . . have to construe truth as correspondence to reality. . . . By contrast, those who wish to reduce objectivity to solidarity . . . view truth as, in William James’ phrase, what is good for us to believe. So they do not need an account of a relation between beliefs and objects called “correspondence”’.

The second principal way that postmodernists have attacked the nature and knowability of truth is derived from another angle of Nietzsche’s philosophy. Truth is not correspondence with reality, but is reduced to a function of power relationships. By suppressing the weak in society, the powerful exert their voice to guarantee that it will influence the world. In this perspective, truth is seen as that which favors the powerful. As Foucault once put it: ‘I think that, instead of trying to find out what truth is, as opposed to error, it might be more interesting to take up the program posed by Nietzsche: how is it that, in our societies, “the truth” has been given this value, thus placing us absolutely under its thrall’.

One of the negative impacts of postmodernism is that human understanding is so conditioned by historical and cultural contingencies that it becomes incapable of knowing objective truths. Other postmodernists contend that truth is the product of the human drive for power, not reality as such. No matter which conception is proffered, both are relevant for Catholics because they undermine the idea that Christianity is true for everyone. And if Christianity is not true, then why should believers seek to evangelize others to embrace it? The denial of objective truth undercuts the impetus for participating in the Great Commission. What means of persuasion could be given if Christianity is merely one of many opinions in the marketplace of ideas? The negative side to postmodernism militates against rational apologetics, whose practitioners firmly believe that the principal reason why anyone should believe in Christianity is because it is true for everyone.

II. POSTMODERNISM AND THE NEED FOR RATIONAL APOLOGETICS

Traditionally Catholic apologists assumed that truth is objective, exclusive, and absolute. The knowability of objective truth was not a concern for them. Rather, they began with establishing God’s existence, the human need for God, and then argued for the historical credibility for Jesus’ divinity. All this culminated in an assessment of which church best fits the four attributes of the Church (i.e., one, holy, catholic, and apostolic). This step-by-step method made good sense, for it did not seem reasonable for doubters of the faith to believe that Jesus is the Son of God unless there is a God who can have a Son who can institute a certain type of Church.
Because this method was typically accompanied by a faulty epistemological outlook (Enlightenment rationalism), the situation in apologetic methodology must change today; for the burning issue today is whether anything is objectively true, let alone that it can be known as such. According to Pope Benedict XVI: ‘Relativism has thus become the central problem for the faith at the present time. . . . The faith cannot be liberated if reason itself does not open up again. If the door to metaphysical cognition remains closed, if the limits of human knowledge set by Kant are impassable, faith is destined to atrophy: It simply lacks air to breathe’. I propose that a refurbished classical apologetics can not only evade the older epistemological error commonly known as ‘evidentialism’; it must also begin with the nature of truth, for apologetical arguments and other related evidence assumes the knowability of first principles.

While many forms of post-conciliar apologetics have appealed to beauty or goodness as a means of persuasion, these should not become the exclusive basis for the apologist. Emphasizing truth without beauty and goodness can lead to dogmatism (which was part of the problem with pre-conciliar classical apologetics). An approach that appeals to beauty at the expense of the other transcendentals can lead to hedonism; and goodness without truth and beauty can lead to legalism. Thus, what is sorely needed is an emphasis that provides evidence which leads to all the transcendentals, not to one over the others, for all the transcendentals are formal descriptions of God himself. Other approaches can and must complement the rational approach. In reaction to neo-scholasticism, then, which was heavily concerned with the truth of Christian faith, theologians should also emphasize the beauty, goodness, truth, and the relationality of the Godhead. When individuals stress truth at the expense of other transcendentals, this can lead persons down the path of rationalism which can make one combative, triumphalistic, and, in a worst-case scenario, atheistic; but this should not become an excuse for giving up on truth. As one noteworthy commentator states: ‘although Aquinas says that the Five Ways are arguments for the existence of God, they are not intended as an exhaustive defense of belief in God’s existence’.

Because the surrounding context must be taken into consideration when doing apologetics, some occasions are simply not conducive to engaging in rational apologetics, (which relies on the mind and the proper use of evidence). But when the opportunity arises for such interaction, the place to begin might be with the nature and knowability of truth, especially if one’s dialogue partner is skeptical about objective truth in the first place. The success of the evidence for Jesus of Nazareth and the positive influence that Christianity has had upon the world all depend on the logical precondition of God’s existence. The arguments for God’s existence depend on first principles such as the law of non-contradiction, the law of identity, and the law of the excluded middle; and it is precisely the first principles of knowledge that postmodern relativism resists.

On the contemporary scene, some Catholic publications do not touch on the need for rational apologetics. One of the best works in the apologetics literature is undoubtedly René Latourelle’s *Christ and the Church: Signs of Salvation*. Latourelle takes great pains to stress the importance of the evidential power of human holiness. It must be said, however, that if a person is holy, they will use every means to reach unbelievers (and lukewarm believers) with the Good News, not just ways that exclude the mind and verbal persuasion. Holiness may be more than rational, but is certainly not less than rational. Conversely, if one uses rational argument, then this can become a means by which one is sanctified. Latourelle paints with beautiful, broad strokes in his otherwise excellent book by emphasizing the importance of holiness without elaborating much further on the need for a rational apologetics. Of course, rational apologetics is not always needed, and is
dependent on the context of the discussion. Therefore correct readings of Vatican II will include the use of rational apologetics, but go beyond it as well. Francis Martin notes: ‘It is, after all, not a council’s role to embark on new speculative teaching but rather to clarify and substantiate the Church’s traditional teaching and to elucidate the way in which it is a light to the pilgrim Church of the present and the future’.

Theologians such as Hans urs Van Balthasar contend that love must serve as the primary means of apologetic persuasion. As in the case with Latourelle, there is something right about this contention. But, if one loves, then appeal can and should be made to reason (especially if the context and/or dialogue allows for it). As the framers of Gaudium et Spes acknowledge:

Love and good will, to be sure, must in no way render us indifferent to truth and goodness. Indeed love itself impels the disciples of Christ to speak the saving truth to all men. But it is necessary to distinguish between error, which always merits repudiation, and the person in error, who never loses the dignity of being a person even when he is flawed by false or inadequate religious notions. God alone is the judge and searcher of hearts, for that reason He forbids us to make judgments about the internal guilt of anyone.

Like the other transcendentals, an apologetics based on love cannot replace the enterprise of rational apologetics.

Of course, not every published work in the post-conciliar era has appealed to beauty or goodness. Every so often a good work of Catholic rational apologetics can be found. Benedict Ashley’s Choosing a World-View and Value System: An Ecumenical Apologetics is one of the few published works in the mainstream that is unafraid to engage central issues of credibility with reason and hard evidence. Like other works in rational apologetics (e.g., works by Hugo Meynell, John Martinelli and Richard Purtill), Ashley successfully avoids the pitfalls of Enlightenment rationalism, comparing and contrasting different conceptions of deity. Unfortunately, however, there is no engagement with the first principles that make the project of natural theology and the demonstratio christiana coherent and thus reasonable to engage in. Correlatively, there is no substantial engagement with postmodern relativism in these works. Undoubtedly one of the main reasons why individuals under the influence of postmodernism resist these books is that they believe there is no such thing as objective truth, let alone that it could be known.

A perhaps stronger tradition of rational apologetics after Vatican II has come from the so-called ‘Transcendental Thomists’. However, even these theologians do not see an urgent need to explicate and defend the nature and knowability of truth for the purpose of reinvigorating the discipline of apologetics. An important reference work is the Dictionary of Fundamental Theology, which has dozens of fine articles on issues of credibility, yet hardly any of the contributors discuss the postmodern critique and the ramifications this has had on Catholic apologetics and/or evangelization. Avery Dulles’ standard work on the history of apologetics barely mentions the influence of rational apologetics after Vatican II. Though he commends a handful of lay apologists for their enthusiasm in using evidence for faith, Catholic scholars working in the mainstream have yet to make their presence felt.

Because the primary lens through which many individuals interpret the world is relativistic, apologists can and should begin with truth. Still many theologians resist anything that resembles a reasoned defense of the faith, claiming that it smacks of modernism, where the canons of reason are upheld at the expense of other forms of
knowing. However, this is a serious misreading of Enlightenment rationalism and its relationship to rational apologetics. To this we now turn.

III. RATIONAL APOLOGETICS AND ENLIGHTENMENT RATIONALISM

Cartesian foundationalism (which emanates from the philosophy of René Descartes, 1596–1650) is an epistemological outlook that insists that unless knowledge is self-evident or incorrigible, one does not have true knowledge. As a reaction to modernism, postmodernists have dealt a heavy blow to Descartes’ foundationalism. The latter is both self-refuting and arbitrary. As a result, his epistemological theory has been almost universally rejected by philosophers. But this does not mean all foundationalisms are incoherent. While the postmodern critique has been widely accepted, it does not successfully apply to modified versions of foundationalism that have been gaining in momentum since the mid-1970’s. These are more modest, making it difficult for the postmodernist critique to succeed. As philosopher Tim Triplett recognizes: ‘It is not clear that the standard arguments against foundationalism will work against these newer, more modest theories. Indeed, these theories were by and large designed with the purpose of overcoming standard objections’.35 Indeed, without some version of foundationalism, the common ground that is needed for effective communication would be lost. As Pope John Paul II declared:

Although times change and knowledge increases, it is possible to discern a core of philosophical insight within the history of thought as a whole. Consider, for example, the principles of non-contradiction, finality and causality, as well as the concept of the person as a free and intelligent subject, with the capacity to know God, truth and goodness. Consider as well certain fundamental moral norms which are shared by all. These are among the indications that, beyond different schools of thought, there exists a body of knowledge which may be judged a kind of spiritual heritage of humanity. It is as if we had come upon an implicit philosophy, as a result of which all feel that they possess these principles, albeit in a general and unreflective way. Precisely because it is shared in some measure by all, this knowledge should serve as a kind of reference-point for the different philosophical schools. Once reason successfully intuits and formulates the first universal principles of being and correctly draws from them conclusions which are coherent both logically and ethically, then it may be called right reason or, as the ancients called it, orthós logos, recta ratio.36

Like Cartesian foundationalism, the Pope maintains that some principles are universally applicable to human knowers and are inherent in reality itself; otherwise nothing could be known by anyone at any time or place. First principles are either undeniable or are reducible to the undeniable.37 Unlike Cartesian foundationalism, however, epistemological foundations in the modified version are necessary for knowledge, but they are not totally absolute. As Robert Audi pointedly observed: ‘it requires epistemic unmoved movers, but not unmovable movers. Solid ground is enough, even if bedrock is better. There are also different kinds of bedrock, and not all of them have the invulnerability apparently belonging to beliefs of luminously self-evident truths of logic’.38 Let us call this modified version ‘soft foundationalism,’ or ‘fallibilist foundationalism’. This difference is the first way in which fallibilism differs from classical foundationalism. The kind of foundationalism that is necessary for Catholic apologists to understand, articulate and defend does not therefore have to be Cartesian; rather a modified version can be defended – one that is immune to the postmodern critique.

The self-evident principles of foundationalism are true by their very nature.39 To deny them one must engage in self-contradictory statements. In a sense, then, individuals must
use them. Consequently, one of the increasingly evident objections to anti-realist views of truth is the problem of auto-referentiality: the incapability of postmodern relativism to apply its own tenets to its own conceptions of truth. In Catholic philosophies, first principles are intrinsic to the nature of God (the first universal) and each person, all of which have been created in the image of God (second universal). Other modes of understanding (ones that are not at the same foundational level as first principles) are not known with logical certainty, but are still held with certainty at a more proximate level.

The second argument for first principles is that there must be an ultimate basis for truth claims, otherwise there would be an infinite regress of reasons for justifying knowledge (which is impossible). Thirdly, unlike classical foundationalism, the relationship between secondary propositions (i.e., propositions that are known with less certainty than indubitable first principles) and indubitable first principles is an inductive one, not a deductive one. Secondary propositions are derived somehow from other first principles, but they are not derived deductively from them. So the problem with classical foundationalism did not consist in its endorsement of first principles, but rather in its restrained definition of what could count as a first principle. In Cartesian foundationalism, knowledge must be reduced to self-evident or incorrigible beliefs. Under fallibilism, human experience (e.g., beliefs related to memory and sense perception), and even faith in the Christian God can count as true knowledge. Within these parameters, modified versions allow for the possibility that persons may err and misinterpret what is at least thought to be true in the process of acquiring knowledge.

Even from the standpoint of faith, then, a type of fallibilism can be practiced. Take the Chalcedonian definition on the two natures of Christ. One can be certain through faith that Christ is true God and true man, but there would still be room for additional exploration and a more profound understanding of the incarnation within the parameters set officially by Chalcedon. As Walter Kasper explains, ‘Revelation is “supra-rational,” not irrational or antirational. It represents the enrichment of reason, not a spurning or constriction of it’. For every kataphatic statement of theology, there is a corresponding apophatic element. From the standpoint of the apologist, the evidence and arguments for faith can never be logically certain (though first principles and what they can demonstrate is actually undeniable), but is more probabilistic and thus tentative in nature. Beginning from the ‘ground up,’ apologists begin with first principles; beginning from the ‘top down,’ they seek resonance with what is already believed about revelation.

Not only is the denial of first principles self-refuting, but adherents of anti-realist views of truth are unable to live out their views with any sort of consistency. As Hugo Meynell said in an earlier number of this journal: ‘Not only does everyone else assume in effect that what I have called rationality is the best means to believing truly and acting well; deconstructionists and postmoderns do so themselves, the moment they leave their desks’. Postmodernists present their views not as mere expressions of feeling, but as viewpoints that their readers will comprehend and accept what they have to say. They also hold that their viewpoints are preferable to competing positions, and that there are correct and incorrect interpretations of their positions. As a case in point, Derrida smuggled in a realist conception of truth when he made it evident that one of his detractors misunderstood what he was saying (in a long, ninety-three page article!).

Understanding the shift from classical foundationalism to fallibilism is critically important for reinstating the use of rational apologetics in a post-conciliar Church. The history of apologetics strongly suggests that when apologists absorb Cartesian foundationalism (and its corollary, evidentialism), it becomes easy for atheism to follow.
shortly thereafter. For it was not until Descartes and Kant that the rational arguments for God’s existence became the foundation upon which theologians sought to show the credibility of Christianity. The upshot of this development was that theologians began to think of religion primarily in terms of reason alone. The effect was that revelation became relegated to a lower, less important role. Deism flourished, and atheism followed shortly thereafter. As Michael Buckley explains: ‘the strategies of theism or religious apologetics in early modernity had led theologians to bracket whatever was of specific religious character or warrant and to rely upon the new and prospering sciences for ‘the first foundations of religion.’ The implicit but unrecognized premise in such a strategy, building on the new mechanics, was that the uniquely religious—in all of its experiential, traditional, institutional, and social forms—was cognitively empty’.47 The truths of the faith should never be seen as a stepping stone building on top of the conclusions of reason. That procedure would be guilty of the evidentialist temptation.46

According to evidentialists, beliefs are rational if and only if one has reasons to ground one’s belief. As W. K. Clifford memorably put it: ‘It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence’.48 Thus one should not believe in God or in Christianity unless one has good reasons to believe in it. But the Church insists that although one might have evidence to make faith reasonable, such evidence is not necessary for all believers to have ready in defense of the faith.49 Only those believers endowed with certain virtues and/or callings are called to do rational apologetics. Instead, the ground upon which our faith rests is found in God’s revelation to humanity. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church plainly states: ‘What moves us to believe is not the fact that revealed truths appear as true and intelligible in the light of our natural reason: we believe “because of the authority of God himself who reveals them, who can neither deceive nor be deceived”’.50 The bishops add: ‘Faith is certain. It is more certain than all human knowledge because it is founded on the very word of God who cannot lie’.51 Therefore, argument may help to confirm one’s belief in Christianity, and it may serve as a means providing signs to unbelievers, but the arguments themselves do not constitute the ground upon which faith stands (or falls). Believing in Christ provides one with certainty of the truth of Christianity, but the reasons for this faith have a more provisional character. Aquinas holds that Catholic faith can be known with as much certainty as first principles such as the law of non-contradiction!52

Aware of the dangers of evidentialism, many theologians seem unaware of the distinction between the classical and modified versions of foundationalism, and they prematurely reject the enterprise of rational apologetics altogether. For them, it is reminiscent of the parasitical origins of atheism upon the apologists’ attempts to defend Christianity. In his classic work on the existence of God, for instance, Hans Küng argued against the dogmatic definitions on the natural knowledge of God (as pronounced in Dei Filius). He claimed that there is no ‘substructure of reason’ that all persons can agree with. According to him, the ‘uncertainty of human existence and of reality as a whole’ prevents us from reasoning to God’s existence from the things that have been made. Roger Haight claims that the conditioned nature of human reason precludes the possibility that one can demonstrate God’s existence through the use of rational argument: ‘That God is, that God is personal and universally gracious, are not assertions that are based on knowing in an ordinary sense and cannot be demonstrated or verified in any objective way . . . In the end there can be no universal power of reason to uncover the shape of transcendent reality because reason itself is historically conditioned’.54 Unfortunately Haight and Küng seem to misunderstand the shift from classical foundationalism to fallibilism (or, they are simply
First principles are not restricted to self-evident or incorrigible truths; they can be derived from history, culture, and other social contingencies, providing individuals with true understandings of the world.

Critiquing a method of discovering the truth is surely a different enterprise from defining what truth is. Thus the Cartesian epistemological tradition had it right when they understood truth as correspondence with reality—universal, objective, absolute, and exclusive. The nature of truth had been accepted from the time of Plato and Aristotle and was not new at the time of the Enlightenment. Where Descartes got it wrong was in the idea that knowing the truth must be relegated to reason alone. For there is a significant difference between the nature of truth and the tests used to discover it. Catholics can agree with the entire previous western philosophical tradition with respect to the nature of truth, not with the latter that emanated from Descartes. Our knowledge of the truth (an epistemological issue) is influenced by culture, biology, political environment, upbringing, economics, gender, and so on, not the question of truth itself (a metaphysical reality) being absolute, universal, objective, exclusive, eternally engaging, systematic, and one.

IV. POSTMODERNITY AND THE PROSPECTS FOR RATIONAL APOLOGETICS

The Thomistic proofs for God’s existence all depend on first principles. If the Council Fathers at Vatican I had Aquinas’s proofs for God’s existence in mind, this would not mean that classical foundationalism was being upheld by the Church. Rather, it must mean that another type of foundationalism must be valid (perhaps the version mentioned by Pope John Paul II, or the one being discussed in this essay). What the Council must be saying, in one way or another, is that some knowledge can be universally known. First principles do not have to be logically self-evident for the Thomistic proofs to be considered ‘proofs’ in the full sense of that term. While Aquinas’s arguments for God are not logically compelling, they still prove that God exists. For certainty in scholastic terminology allows for different degrees of conviction: logical certainty, moral certainty, virtual certainty, and so on. ‘As a lifelong student of Aristotle,’ Ralph McInerney urges, ‘Thomas was convinced that there are sound and cogent proofs of God’s existence. For Thomas, natural
theology is not a possibility. It is a fact. It is the achievement of pagan philosophy. *Ab esse ad posse valet illatio*.59

While there might be probabilistic arguments for God’s existence, Aquinas says, these arguments are too weak – lest believers become more of a laughingstock to unbelievers.60 Indeed, for Aquinas probabilistic arguments do not make sense unless it is assumed that we live in an ordered universe; and if we live in an ordered universe, then we need a Supreme Orderer who gives it the order that it has. This is what Aquinas argued in his fifth way (the fifth proof for God’s existence in the *Summa Theologiae*). Aquinas’s proofs thus capture an undeniable existential insight. With fallibilist foundationalism in mind, Catholic apologists now may argue that any worldview that contradicts the fundamental claims of Church cannot be true (and so should be rejected). All non-theistic worldviews, religions, and spiritualities can be disproven because traditional theism can be positively proven through philosophy apart from the influence of faith.

Representatives of anti-apologism may retort: ‘Only the Holy Spirit will bring unbelievers to Christ, not human arguments’. This is certainly true, but a couple of things should be kept in mind. First, the Spirit can work through humans who use arguments for evangelical purposes; it is not an either-or situation. A rational God can use people to reach those who need evidence to believe in something. One can bring a horse to water, but no one can make him drink except by surrendering to the Spirit. God can work through the intellect to lend credibility to the decision of faith; anything less would be fideistic. In the words of Brian Hebblethwaite, ‘it is surely a mistake to regard the logic of theological rationality as something wholly internal to the perspective of faith. Torrence, and Barth too, are entirely persuasive in their insistence on theological rationality being responsive to the unique nature of theology’s object. But the supposition that theological thinking has its own logic only available within the relation of grace and faith, has the same effect as Lonergan’s insistence on conversion. It makes theology, natural or revealed, undiscussable, immune to criticism, and unsusceptible of being pondered hypothetically’.61

Many theologians are correct when they claim that faith has its own unique rationality that is unavailable to unbelievers; this should not mean, however, that theological claims should not be evaluated by Christians and their opponents. Nobody believes in anything unless they first know that it is believable. Faith, to be sure, is not a blind leap in the dark without evidence. Neither will evidence demand faith, for unbelievers will always come up with different excuses as to why the Catholic faith is false or irrelevant. When considering the relevant reasons for faith, apologists must never give the impression that faith is based on the conclusions of reason. Rather, the Christian faith is based on the saving work of Jesus Christ; faith, however, can be supported and reinforced by reason.

As a result of the modification from classical to fallibilist foundationalism, Catholic apologists will now have to resort, for the most part, to a cumulative case for Catholic faith, not apodictic demonstration (though God’s existence can still be proven in the non-mathematical sense of the term if one is Thomistic in their philosophy). Apart from the *preambula fidei*, apologists work with probabilistic arguments in support of Christianity, which is predicated upon marshalling the best evidence we currently have in, say, science, history and philosophy. Though apologists argue for the plausibility of Catholic doctrines, they cannot defend these as objectively true unless they are willing to presuppose first principles which are not limited or relative to cultural, historical, or other social contingencies in the first place.62 Unless first principles exist and can be known by all, the Catholic world and life view would remain insulated and we must then resort to fideism which holds that there is no reason why anyone should believe in anything at all.
Christian doctrine can be seen as an explanatory hypothesis that accounts for a wide variety of features, including history, the cosmos, and the nature of humanity. We would still be within our epistemic rights to argue that the Catholic worldview can outstrip rival hypotheses because of its explanatory power, comprehensiveness, plausibility, logical consistency, livability, and whether competing hypotheses are ad hoc, and so forth. Christian scholars are now beginning to utilize the newer approach to apologetics in contrast to the evidentialist challenge. As a reaction to modernism, postmodernism accords with the provisional nature of knowledge advanced by fallibilism. John Polkinghorne holds that believers can retain their presuppositions when comparing and contrasting their views with other competing claims. The final assessment is predicated on whose Weltanschauung resonates and makes the most sense out of the agreed upon evidence. Though there is no consensus on which criteria should be used, apologists can learn from professional scientists who are used to evaluating their theories through multiple lines of criteria. George Ellis argues that scientific theories are assessed in light of four standards: simplicity, beauty, accuracy in prediction and verifiability, and explanatory power—a capacity for giving the most adequate account of problematic data. Philosopher of science Ernan McMullin offers six criteria: predictive accuracy, internal coherence, external consistency, unifying power, fertility, and simplicity. Other notable scientists, such as Howard J. Van Till, Ian Barbour, and Francisco Ayala, offer another distinctive set of criteria to test their scientific theories.

V. IN DEFENSE OF A PRIMITIVE CORRESPONDENCE THEORY OF TRUTH

Until the middle of the nineteenth century almost every mainstream philosopher in the West held to some form of the correspondence theory of truth. In the correspondence view (or, as others might call it, a ‘realist conception of truth’), minds are either knowing or ignorant; propositions are either true or false; and reality is either real or imaginary. Truth pertains to those properties of a proposition which refer to reality. So when a proposition (i.e., a belief, thought, statement, or any other mode of representation) accurately represents reality, then the proposition is said to be true. When the proposition does not correspond to reality, then the proposition is said to be false (or, depending on the content of the proposition, it may be partially true or false). When a mind assents to a true proposition, then the person is said to have knowledge of the truth.

A proposition, moreover, needs to be distinguished from a sentence. A proposition is what a sentence either affirms or denies. Another way to understand this is that a proposition is what a sentence means. Questions, imperatives, exclamations, requests, and entreaties are not propositions, but presuppose the truth of at least one proposition which successfully refers to reality. For example, the imperative command, ‘do not allow abortions!’, is not a proposition as such, but presupposes the proposition that ‘abortion is wrong’. The proposition ‘abortion is wrong’ corresponds to the reality of the moral realm. Propositions, moreover, can be controversial, trivial, obscure, frightening, or comforting. Yet none of these features of propositions would refute a primitive correspondence theory of truth. Although the significance or subjective effect of a proposition might be person-relative, this would not mean the truth or falsity of the proposition (or the correspondence theory itself) should be cast into doubt. Hence, the nature of a proposition needs to be distinguished from the effects it has on persons. God’s revelation is propositional, but it comes to persons in various forms, and it has many different effects on individuals and/or
communities. Thus the purpose of the propositional model is to ensure that one Mind is communicating with human minds. Without a propositional view, the cognitive content that is necessary for interpersonal communication is rendered impossible.

Similarly, a proposition is not the same thing as a perspective. Everyone has perspectives about what they think is the truth. Perspectives can be biased, prejudiced, ignorant, and uninformed, but this is not the same thing as saying that truth itself is relative. Rather, a perspective is always a perspective on or about something, or someone, independent and outside of the percipient’s viewpoint. Perspectives are either successful or unsuccessful in their attempt to capture reality. Taken to the extreme, perspectivalism is self-stultifying, for it assumes that perspectivalism is true – and that all other views in competition with it must be false. Hence truth must be distinguished from what is true, how one arrives at the truth, and the effects that truth has on persons. In no way is metaphysical objectivity incompatible with epistemological subjectivity. Our epistemological thrust toward the truth is loaded with all sorts of factors which influence us as limited knowers – level of intelligence, background beliefs, education, gender, motivation, personal interests, upbringing, genetics, etc.

All true propositions have a few common characteristics. First, truth is exclusive and antithetical. For every article of faith that is pronounced as true, any other viewpoint which is in opposition to it will necessarily be false. In this way, truth is, by definition, antithetical. Anything that opposes the truth is incorrect. Moreover, truth is specific. Assuming that the correspondence theory is true, Catholics should recognize that although we are unable to exhaust the truth, the goal of every Christian teacher should be to present Catholic doctrine with exactitude. In fact, so strong does the Church believe that her teachers should be exact when they teach the faith that she implores the faithful that it will be more difficult for unbelievers and doubters to come to faith unless they hear the truth in the way it is supposed to be presented. The Council expresses this concern from a theological standpoint about doctrine in Gaudium et Spes 21 and Dei Verbum 1. Truth, moreover, is absolute (truth applies to everyone, at all times and everywhere) and objective (if something is true then it is true for everyone regardless if anyone believes in it or knows it or not). Not to be overlooked, truth is also eternally engaging (it can never be exhausted). Truth is unified and systematic (truth is one; truth will never contradict another truth). It is always an end in and of itself; it is never a mere means to an end.

There are at least two positive arguments in support of a primitive correspondence view of truth. First, the theory has commonsense appeal. Before one comes to the philosophical task of understanding the world, one already has a common-sense notion of what truth is. At least one form of the correspondence theory of truth seems to capture both commonsense appeal. Therefore its pre-analytic justification gives individuals something with which to start. When most people speak of truth, they are usually referring to ‘what is the case’. Second, those who endorse arguments against the correspondence theory seem to presuppose it in their presentations. In short, the correspondence theory of truth seems rationally inescapable. To say that ‘truth does not correspond to reality’ one must implicitly hold that this describes a true state of affairs.

If someone holds to the correspondence theory of truth and claims to believe in Jesus Christ, this would not mean that she has unlimited or perfect knowledge of God (or any other doctrine believed by Christians). For every kataphatic statement of theology there is an apophatic element. Hence, to deny that absolute truth can be known not only gets something wrong about philosophy, but it also gets something wrong about the nature of faith. Having faith does not stretch the shape of truth in a direction that is unnatural to it,
but strengthens and clarifies what persons naturally desire to know. Advocates of critical realism recognize that we are always in the process of trying to achieve a truer perspective about the truth. Nor would belief in the universal lordship of Jesus Christ entail that we can prove the truth of the Catholic Church to anyone at will. Mentioned earlier, verifying Christian faith and positing it as the truth are two very different things. When someone believes in the absolute truth of Christianity, this would not preclude one from participating in the give and take of argument and evidence both for and against faith. For genuine respect for the mystery of faith will seek to understand more fully that which is believed. Of course, the process of trying to understand the faith will include vigorous intellectual striving and therefore be an attempt to reach people with good arguments for the Gospel. Nor would the belief that Catholicism is true mean that everything that we believe as Catholics must be held definitively or that we are always inerrant in our understanding of the truth.

VI. ADDRESSING DEFEATERS

In this section we are going to address arguments against a primitive correspondence theory of truth from within the standpoint of philosophical theology. The reason for addressing these defeaters is that these objections are often used to undercut the need for rational apologetics.

1) The first objection is that the correspondence theory is not found in the Bible or in Church teaching. Now, it has never been the primary intention of the Church to enunciate a particular theory of truth. When the Church pronounces on certain theological matters, she assumes that her doctrines are true. This does not mean that the Scriptural writers did not presuppose the soundness of a particular theory of truth (namely, truth as correspondence with reality).69 The biblical terms for truth are etem and aletheia. Though these terms are broadly understood and multifaceted, the biblical writers assumed that the actions they referred to when using these terms were actions of reality: faithfulness, rectitude, etc. Clearly, the Scriptural writers assumed that what they were saying in regard to salvation depended upon metaphysical realities and held to other similar assumptions. As one commentator puts it: ‘In tradition, in addition to the use of the notion of truth derived from Greek philosophy [i.e., truth as correspondence], we find in some of the fathers and in the liturgy a resumption and development of the biblical conception of truth, but sometimes with a stronger emphasis on its doctrinal aspect. Generally speaking, truth designates the Christian faith, i.e., the divine revelation as it has been handed down in the church’.70

2) The next objection is that the correspondence theory is unable to account for the mysteries of faith. These objectors are often influenced by Eastern religious thought. In this view, all religions are seen as inadequate pointers to what is ultimately inexpressible. This ultimate mystery exceeds the use of human logic.

The project of rational apologetics will certainly be undercut if believers are unable to give a reason for their hope. There might as well be no apologetic mandate at all if God cannot be spoken of. For there would be no common points of contact with persons who do not share our common faith convictions. And if there are no common points of contact with doubters and outsiders, then how could anyone be held accountable for rejecting the Christian God?

Christians must learn how to understand the incomprehensibility of God in such a way that still preserves some knowledge of the divine. It is not under dispute that Catholic truth
is deeper than conceptual and linguistic categories of speech. Truth is more than rational; it is personal, moral, dynamic, and life changing. There is always room to explore the fullness of truth even more fully. Just because there is absolute truth, this would not mean that our understanding of it is absolute. Although truth goes above reason, it is definitely not irrational. There is a sense in which the ‘otherness’ of God evades both cognitive and linguistic categories, but this would not mean all language is incapable of adequately referring to God. One cannot say that language does not apply to God unless one is capable of successfully applying certain concepts to God in the first place. Take the statement ‘no linguistic categories or conceptions can apply meaningfully to God’. One would have to know something meaningful about God in order to know that ‘nothing’ linguistic or conceptual applies to him; theologians cannot know what God is not unless one already knows what God is.71 To say God is not a creature, one must have some previous understanding of God. Thus, one must know something about the term ‘God’ in order to employ the via negativa. Otherwise one could not distinguish God from created entities. Thus the issue is not whether we can apply certain concepts to God, but how we pour meaning into those concepts. The way meaning is poured into these concepts has traditionally been negative.

(3) Some postmodernists might respond by noting that first principles are merely expressions of Aristotelian logic—constructions of Western thought which are not applicable to other times and cultures (or religious understanding). Wilfred Cantwell Smith is representative of this outlook: ‘Modern Western logic, I myself am pretty sure, though serviceable for computers, is in other ways inept and is particularly ill-suited, it seems, for thinking about spiritual matters’.72 Not only does Smith smuggle in an ‘objection from mystery’ (objection 2) here, but he also challenges the universality of first principles by affirming that they are conditioned.

A few things could be said in response to this. Smith seems to be confusing the nature of propositions with the linguistic style and/or thought patterns used to express a proposition. According to William Lane Craig and J.P. Moreland:

In his Summa Theologiae, Thomas used a literary style in which his prose explicitly follows strict logical form and syllogistic presentation. By contrast, an isolated culture in the mountains of Brazil may use a poetic form of oral tradition, their sentences may not follow an explicit, tidy subject-predicate form, and they may reach tribal conclusions in ways quite foreign to Western culture. But none of this has anything to do with the deep logical structure that underlies their claims or with the conformance of their individual assertions to the three laws of logic, and it is simply a mistake to think otherwise. We invite the reader to present any declarative utterance in any culture, including the assertion that ‘Western logic,’ is culturally relative, that does not conform to Aristotle’s three laws of logic. Any such assertion, to the degree that it is meaningful or asserted as true or false, will conform to the three laws of logic. Any alleged counterexample will either be self-refuting or meaningless. After all, Aristotle did not invent these laws any more than Columbus invented the New World. Aristotle may have been a Western thinker and he may have discovered these laws, but that does not imply that the laws themselves are Western constructions.73

Thus, there is a difference between cultural expressions and the underlying logic which undergirds every person’s thinking. Mentioned earlier, a proposition is not the same thing as a sentence. John Searle points out: ‘From the fact that a description can only be made relative to a set of linguistic categories, it does not follow that the facts/states of affairs, etc., described can only exist relative to a set of categories’.74 The relativity of sentences would not count as a refutation of the correspondence theory. How our language applies terms is often relative, but this would not mean that some other theory of truth should be
preferred over the correspondence theory. Says Searle: ‘We arbitrarily define the word “cat” in such and such a way; and only relative to such and such definitions can we say, “That’s a cat”. But once we have made the definitions and once we have applied the concepts relative to the system of definitions, whether or not something satisfies our definition is no longer arbitrary or relative. That we use the word “cat” the way we do is up to us; that there is an object that exists independently of that use, and satisfies that use, is a plain matter of (absolute, intrinsic, mind independent) fact’. In effect, the idea that the relative selection of terms should prevent persons from saying that anything can be objectively true makes no more sense than saying that one cannot satisfy their craving for a dessert because there are many kinds of desserts.

A rejection of the correspondence theory is certainly no substitute for actually refuting it. One cannot refute first principles without employing them in the process of providing meaningful statements against them. Saying that ‘first principles are merely expressions of Aristotelian logic’ is tantamount to excluding other propositions that implicitly affirm the principle. So if the objection is true, then it must be false. And if it is false, then it is false as well. Further justification of the assertion that ‘first principles are merely the expressions of Aristotelian logic’ would, in one way or another, have to employ first principles.

(4) Still other critics insist that truth is uninformative and uninteresting in the correspondence theory. Objective truth is static, abstract, cold, and impersonal. Thus Smith says that truth is not to be found in propositions, but in persons alone: ‘Truth, I submit, is a humane, not an objective, concept. It does not lie in propositions’. At this point in the paper we can set aside the obviously self-refuting nature of this contention and demonstrate that even if the point is granted, this would still not count as an argument against the correspondence theory. Rather, it serves as an argument against the possibility of knowing what the truth is. Truth is formally distinct from what is true. In the case of the Catholic apologist, there are truths that are already held.

There are two basic avenues the apologist can take which seem to make this objection irrelevant. On the one hand, one can make arguments from the ‘bottom up’ on the basis of first principles and arrive to some undeniable conclusions, namely, that truth is objective, that God exists, that human beings are more than just material stuff. These truths are based upon first principles. This approach is confident about our mutually shared assumptions (human nature and self-evident first principles). This was a more traditional apologetic methodology. Perhaps the truth that something exists is uninformative and abstract, but we can also know with certainty that God exists, and that an anti-realist view of truth is false. Perhaps these truths are ‘uninteresting,’ but then again this contention is clearly person relative and does not apply to everyone!

On the other hand, it is perfectly acceptable to begin with Christian truths and then compare and contrast them with competing perspectives. From the outset apologists claim that some things are true, and then attempts to rationally argue for these truths. Everyone must begin somewhere; all people interpret reality in a way that is consistent with their underlying presuppositions. No Catholic who holds to the correspondence theory of truth is left with a floating, uninformative conception of truth, but presupposes the truths of Catholic Christianity. There is no reason to suppose that because Christian truth is absolute and unchanging that it cannot be a channel by which individuals come to better understand and experience God. Personal encounter with the divine simply cannot take place in a cognitive vacuum, but assumes that some things are absolutely true.

The final assessment in this newer, ‘top-down’ approach is predicated on whose worldview and value system resonates and thus makes the most sense out of the agreed
upon evidence. Even if this approach begins with a Catholic worldview, this would not have to mean that the Good News is irrational (or that the evidence in favor of the Catholic faith cannot be trusted). Perhaps the Gospel is true and the evidence is trustworthy. As C.S. Lewis wrote: ‘I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen – not only because I see it, but because of it, I see everything else’.\textsuperscript{79} Catholic apologists can begin with their presuppositions. This is no different for anyone else coming at the debate from within their perspectives of the world. It is possible that Christians know the truth about God \textit{because} of faith. What is needed to help persons to determine the truth would still be the careful weighing and assessing of the accepted evidence from the various sides and perspectives to the best of our God given abilities in the dialogue and/or debate.

\textit{(5) Absolute truth prevents inculturation and human individuality.} However, there is a difference between the nature of truth and the various ways in which individuals and groups of people arrive at the truth and express it. There is a difference between the nature of truth and the effect it has on individuals. Truth, as we have seen, is not parochial, partial, and it is not provincial. It allows for creative cultural expression and individuality so long as the Catholic worldview is believed and faithfully lived out. Conversely, certain cultures can make the Gospel message more conducive for reception within that particular culture. Receiving God’s truth does not flatten us out in blind obedience to Christ, but liberates persons to become who they were meant to be. Affirming the objective truth of Catholicism carves out space for the development of individual spiritual gifts, callings, and personality types in the risen Christ.

Apologists now might argue that we would expect the one true faith to be able to affect all people, regardless of the culture they inhabit. When missionaries endeavor to present the timeless truths of the Gospel to persons who have been unaffected by the Catholic world and life view, they are not starting from nothing, but are convinced that because every human being is made in the image of God, there are many things (including the Gospel itself) that all persons can understand. Listen to John Paul II: ‘In proclaiming Christ to non-Christians, the missionary is convinced that through the working of the Spirit, there already exists in individuals and peoples an expectation, even if an unconscious one, of knowing the truth about God, about man, and about how we are to be set free from sin and death. The missionary’s enthusiasm in proclaiming Christ comes from the conviction that he is responding to that expectation, and so he does not become discouraged or cease his witness even when he is called to manifest his faith in an environment that is hostile or indifferent’.\textsuperscript{80}

If the Gospel message is true, then we would expect it to resonate with all persons – no matter when they live or where they are from. As the framers of \textit{Gaudium et Spes} state: ‘Moreover, since in virtue of her mission and nature she is bound to no particular form of human culture, nor to any political, economic, or social system, the Church by her very universality can be a very close bond between diverse human communities and nations, provided these trust her and truly acknowledge her right to true freedom in fulfilling her mission’.\textsuperscript{81} Although human minds are subject to the fluidity of semantics and the syntax of numerous languages and thought patterns, there are some structural constants such as first principles, fallibilist foundationalism, and the referential nature of propositions. It is noteworthy that Vatican II says that the Church should be more focused on what unites us as a human race to generate a sense of unity instead of considering the particularities that are becoming increasingly apparent as of late.\textsuperscript{82}

Apologists will now want to emphasize the success of missionary activity across the many cultures of the world (to bolster their claims about Christ). Relevant is the


Catechism: ‘Only faith can recognize that the Church possesses these properties from her divine source. But their historical manifestations are signs that also speak clearly to human reason. As the First Vatican Council noted, the “Church herself, with her marvelous propagation, eminent holiness, and inexhaustible fruitfulness in everything good, her catholic unity and invincible stability, is a great and perpetual motive of credibility and an irrefutable witness of her divine mission.” The catholicity of the Church testifies to the fact that people from different cultural and religious backgrounds can come to understand the same basic Gospel message, and that it changes individuals and even whole societies for the better.83

(6) Lastly, some claim that either/or thinking can lead to violence. Aside from the fact that either/or thinking is rationally inescapable (i.e., the law of non-contradiction), it must be stressed that first principles do not lead persons to become violent, but that certain understandings and applications of what is thought to be true can steer persons down the path of violence. Well meaning Christians who believe that everything should be conceived in one shade of black and white may unknowingly harbor bad attitudes to justify violence that is opposed to healthy forms of faith and evangelism. So I am not saying that we should renounce hard truth claims, but that certain interpretations of them need to be jettisoned. In a rigid view of truth it becomes easy for Christians to view outsiders as enemies who deserve to be punished because they think differently than believers. As Charles Kimball points out: ‘When particular understandings become rigidly fixed, and uncritically appropriated as absolute truths, well meaning people can and often do paint themselves into a corner from which they must assume a defensive or even offensive posture’.84 Catholic thinking does not do away with absolutes, but allows for a variety of interpretations within an orthodox spectrum. Truth leads to a symphony of voices in unity, not stagnant uniformity. Part of the post-conciliar apologetic approach is one that will include goodness, relationality, beauty and truth. If there is one good thing that postmodernists have taught us, it is that the quest for human understanding cannot be reduced to reason alone. In this very way, postmodernism serves as a corrective to Enlightenment rationalism.

A reason alone approach to faith can incite individuals to rationalism and then combativeness. But on the other hand, I submit that when Christians limit the intellectual engagement of faith, then this can make them prone to become violent as well. For example, it is a known fact that David Koresh and Jim Jones ordered the women in their groups to have sex with them. These women completely bypassed the voice of common sense and conscience and, in blind faith, did what they were told – all in the name of ‘faith’. Thus when reason and faith are divorced from one another, then this can lead persons to become violent. Healthy Catholic faith affects all of a person’s nature, including the mind. It can begin by having adequate evidence, continuing in the proper disciplining of the emotions which culminates in virtuous conduct in cooperation with God’s will. Despite what Richard Dawkins says when he labels faith as ‘blind trust, in the absence of evidence, even in the teeth of evidence,’85 Catholic faith is all about responsible thinking, personal freedom, and common sense. Faith is a rational step into the light, demanding responsible thinking; it is not a credulous leap in the dark. Reasons can be given for faith; and no truth of reason will ever contradict the truths of faith.

It should be stressed that the specificity of accepting Catholic Christianity involves high stakes in the life of discipleship; it demands that we become confrontational with the world’s ways of doing things. Catholics simply cannot rest content in a world streaming with error and many forms of injustice. Apologists must still remain person-sensitive and
culturally aware within the confines of her truth centered dialogue and debate with those who do not share our beliefs. According to Vatican II, the study of other world religions should help Catholics to learn how to refute the errors in other faiths: ‘Let them also be introduced to a knowledge of other religions which are more widespread in individual regions, so that they may acknowledge more correctly what truth and goodness these religions, in God’s providence, possess, and so that they may learn to refute their errors and be able to communicate the full light of truth to those who do not have it’.86 In Ad Gentes, the Fathers state: ‘Moreover let them take care that apostolic activity be not limited to those only who have already been converted. A fair proportion of personnel and funds should be assigned to the evangelization of non-Christians’.87

VII. CONCLUSION

Many postmodernists do not see truth as an objective description of reality. As a result of this paradigmatic shift, the Church’s central claims are no longer seen as binding on all persons. Rather, the Catholic worldview is reinterpreted in terms of opinion. Indirectly this shift makes rational apologetics unfashionable. Because theologians have been relatively silent in addressing this most salient challenge to faith, the need to reinstate the project of rational arguments has been neglected. Philosophical, historical, aesthetic, and experiential evidence may be plausible in making the beliefs of Catholics more credible than competing claims, but for the hardheaded skeptic who is willing to think through the reasons for and against the Catholic Church, this form of apologetics remains indispensable for the purposes of Christian evangelization.

C.S. Lewis once captured this insight in the Screwtape Letters. In the story the senior demon of hell, Screwtape, instructs a lower ranking demon on how to dissuade persons’ from seriously taking the role of reason and evidence in the life of Christian faith. For in so doing, skeptics and other lukewarm believers will be less convinced of Christianity. After all, says Screwtape to his disciple in training: ‘Your man has been accustomed, ever since he was a boy, to have a dozen incompatible philosophies dancing about together inside his head. He doesn’t think of doctrines as primarily “true” or “false,” but as “academic” or “practical,” “outworn” or “contemporary,” “conventional” or “ruthless.” Jargon, not argument, is your best ally in keeping him from the Church.’88 Indeed, Screwtape knew that clear thinking was on the side of the Church.

Notes

1 Richard Rorty, Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1989). This quotation is a paraphrase of one of Rorty’s central points in chapter 1. See especially page 7.
3 Ibid., xxiv.
6 Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason.
8 For more on this development, see Colin Gunton, Enlightenment and Alienation (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2000).
13 Richard Rorty, Consequences of Pragmatism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1982), xili.
23 Austin Flannery, ed., Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents, (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1975), Gaudium et Spes, 4, 10, 11, 12, 41, 62; Apostolicam Actuositatem, 6, 13, 25, 27; Ad Gentes, 10, 20, 21; Presbyterorum Ordinis, 10, 17; Perfectae Caritatis, 20; Christus Dominus, 13.
26 For more on this, see Paul Giffiths, An Apology for Apologetics: A Study in the Logic of Interreligious Dialogue (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1991), pp. 77–84.
33 René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, eds., Dictionary of Fundamental Theology (New York: Crossroad, 2000). At most there are three articles in this volume which briefly allude to the topic addressed in this paper.
37 Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, 1a.17.3. ad 2.
39 The following list of first principles might be set forth: (1) Being is (B is); this is known as the principle of existence. (2) Being is being (B is B); this principle can be called the principle of identity. (3) Being is not nonbeing (B is not non-B); the principle of non-contradiction. (4) Either being or nonbeing (B or non-B); the principle of the excluded middle. (5) Nonbeing cannot cause being (non-B → B); the principle of existential causality.

40 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia2ae.2.10, ad. 2.


47 Michael Buckley, *Denying and Disclosing God: The Ambiguous Progress of Modern Atheism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2004), xi.


50 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, N. 156

51 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, N. 157

52 See the discussion and pertinent references in Etienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Thomism* (New York: P.J. Kenedy and Sons, 1944), p. 20.


56 It should be noted that according to Aquinas first principles are simultaneously both metaphysical and epistemological. Since Aquinas is a realist, there is no disjunction between the rational and the real.


60 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1.9


62 Thomas Aquinas, *Peri Hermeneias*, I, lect. 8


71 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I.4.13.a.2

75 Ibid., p. 166.
81 Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 42.