

Review: JAF7375

CARICATURES OF REASON AND ITS USERS

a feature-length book review of

The End of Apologetics: Christian Witness in a Postmodern Context

by Myron B. Penner

(Baker Academic, 2013)

This review first appeared in the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, volume 37, number 05 (2014). For further information or to subscribe to the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, go to: <http://www.equip.org/christian-research-journal/>.

Postmodernism has largely fallen out of favor in the academic world. The postmodern claim that truth and logic are nothing but social conventions disappointed even secular intellectuals.

Terry Eagleton, once a leading advocate of postmodernism, renounced it in his book, *After Theory* (Basic Books, 2004). *The Philosophers' Magazine* and *Philosophy Now* in recent years have seldom taken up postmodernist themes. Sadly, evangelicals often jump on a secular bandwagon after it has already gone into the ditch, all the time claiming they are breaking new ground.¹

Some Christians want to exhume the corpse and make it a mouthpiece for Christian witness. A major thinker in this ill-conceived project is James K. A. Smith, who spells this out in several books, including *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* (Baker Academic, 2006) and *Desiring the Kingdom* (Baker Academic, 2009). Smith tends to spend less time attacking traditional apologetics than in advancing his postmodern program. Myron Penner, however, has issued a broadside against all of contemporary (and historical) apologetics in *The End of Apologetics*. To remove any ambiguity, by "the end apologetics," he means the *abolition* of apologetics, not the *purpose* of apologetics. Penner

has an audience, since it was given the 2014 “award of merit” in the category of evangelicalism and apologetics by *Christianity Today*. This is ironic, since Penner calls for the suicide of apologetics. He sides with Kierkegaard’s claim that whoever defends Christianity is “Judas number two.”

Since I stand as one of the accused,² allow me some intellectual biography. In 2000, my book, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity* against the Challenge of Postmodernism, was published.³ Given that postmodernism was diluting and dissolving a strong objective sense of truth as well as a respect for classical logic and sound reasoning, I rationally challenged both secular and Christian adherents of this philosophy and defended an apologetic method that appeals to universal principles of reason and objective evidence. But in 2013, I was surprised to find an entire book advancing the same ideas I challenged in 2000.

For Penner, Christian philosophers such as William Lane Craig, J. P. Moreland, and myself are not only doing apologetics wrongly; we are betraying the very message of Christianity itself (p. 42). This is a strong charge, and one that needs to be analyzed carefully. Further, Penner lays out a postmodern “witness” (not apologetic), based largely on the thought of the Christian existentialist philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), but which accepts many ideas from postmodern thinkers such as Richard Rorty, Michel Foucault, and others. I cannot spend much time on that, but will concentrate on his criticisms of contemporary apologists. If these objections fail, then there is no need for a postmodern approach.

Given this background, we are ready to state and then evaluate Penner’s main contentions and arguments.

However, Penner disavows the need to give arguments for his stance. He says he is giving another perspective and refuses to play by the rules laid down by modernism (39). He is inspired in this by secular postmodernist Richard Rorty, who deemed rational argument impossible, since there are no shared standards to guide the disagreements. So, Rorty “changed the subject” when his views were challenged. This is mere sophistry: a disregard for truth-seeking through critical thinking and rational dialogue with others. This is the rhetoric of intellectual defeat masquerading as profundity. Moreover, one must analyze a position—especially a controversial one such as jettisoning the basic method of all previous apologists—in order to engage it authentically. This is not optional.

Penner claims that contemporary apologists, such as Craig and Moreland, are unconsciously enslaved to a “modern” method of argumentation that (1) does not “work” in the postmodern world and (2) is unfaithful to the gospel itself, given its modern and “secular” assumptions (42). Penner claims that Craig, Moreland, Phillip E.

Johnson, and I are not defending the gospel in our apologetics, but rather a modern counterfeit, which he labels OUNCE (42). This stands for “objective, universal, neutral, complex.” (He threw in the “e” to make it clever, it seems.) For Penner, the benighted and bewitched apologists claim that belief can be justified through objectively rational means that any honest person has access to. This he takes to be terribly wrong. But before exploring his critique, we must expose the straw man in his description.

Straw Man. The modern apologists mentioned above believe that Christian *truth* is objective in its nature and universal in its scope.⁴ This is the *metaphysics* of truth. However, they do not claim that *persons* are objective or neutral in the sense of being unaffected by context and personality. That concerns the *epistemology* of coming to know truth. Over and over, Penner caricatures contemporary apologists as denying the subjectivity and individuality of the persons to whom they give arguments. But this does not follow from their view of truth. In fact, one objective truth that contemporary apologists affirm is that persons have objective moral worth because they bear the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26). Therefore, apologetic endeavor should always be done with “gentleness and respect,” as the apostle Peter counsels (1 Pet. 3:15).⁵ The apostle Paul agrees: “And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth” (2 Tim. 2:24–25).

I make this point clear in *Truth Decay* and *Christian Apologetics*,⁶ having been greatly inspired by the deeply rational and deeply personal apologetic of Francis Schaeffer (1912–1984). However, the apologists Penner critiques do not believe, like him, that social conditions or language differences render people incapable of knowing objective reality or that reason lacks the power to convince. Paul says concerning God’s revelation that we see through a glass dimly, but we can see. We know in part, but we can know (1 Cor. 13). Thus, Penner erects a straw apologist to knock down with a postmodernist plethora of print.⁷ But Penner also appeals to another fallacy: the false dichotomy.

False Dichotomy. Penner condemns the modern apologists for defending Christianity as a set of rationally compelling *propositions*, rather than as practices such as worship, confession, witness, and so on. (A proposition is what a declarative sentence means.) But none of the mentioned apologists deny the need for Christian devotion as shown through these practices. However, the practices of the Christian are meaningless or pointless unless Christianity is true and unless we can know that it is true. Devotion is

impossible without conviction. Why give to the church, pray, confess our sins, or suffer persecution if we are in the dark about the object of our faith? Apologetics defends the truths that are foundational to the practices, such as the existence of God, the deity of Christ, and the truth of the Bible. There is no dichotomy between believing and doing. I know of no major apologist who advocates intellectual assent *at the expense of* devotional actions. This is a false dichotomy, which dogs Penner throughout the book.

Penner also says that in “the premodern world” people did not think of holding propositions about things, but rather of “participating in the world.” But his lack of explanation does not restrain him from mounting an assault against the appeal to propositions in apologetics.

Propositions are essential not only for apologetics but also for all intelligible communication. We see this in many ways. One can *mean* the same thing in two very different sentences: (1) *My car is black* and (2) *I have a black car*. The meaning of both sentences is a proposition, which is not identical to either sentence, but is what the sentences are about. If there were no propositions, then this kind of conceptual equivalence (amidst linguistic difference) would be impossible. But it is, of course, not impossible.

Further, translation from one language to another requires the existence of propositions. I often illustrate this in my apologetics classes (which Penner would not like to be a student in) by having students say, “Jesus is Lord,” in languages other than English. I then hear various acoustic blasts in Spanish, Korean, Chinese, Amharic, and other languages. The fact that my students can do this testifies to the existence of propositions. Language involves more than propositions (such as questions and commands), but it cannot function without them.⁸

The idea that premodern thinkers did not appeal to propositions is false. Penner refers to and rejects “the classical notion of *adequatio rei et intellectus*” (114); that is, that the mind must be adequate to take in the world truthfully. This principle is found in the work of Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), who is a *premodern* thinker, not one of those nasty modern philosophers who Penner takes aim at. Moreover, Aquinas followed another *premodern*, Aristotle, in this claim. Although Thomas did not use the same language as modern philosophers, without question he claimed that the mind must conform to reality in order for one’s beliefs to be true. Moreover, the Bible itself assumes this view. Consider Paul’s famous discussion of the resurrection of Christ and general resurrection of the dead in 1 Corinthians:

And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised

Christ from the dead. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. (15:14–19)

None of these claims make sense unless the propositions in question are objectively true. Our faith is not in vain because the proposition, “Christ is raised from the dead,” corresponds to the historical fact of the matter—and this changed everything. But Penner speaks rather of truth as that which “edifies” (96–101). This would make truth subjective and dependent on persons. Paul responds, “Let God be true, though every human being a liar” (Rom. 3:4).

Sound Reasoning Is Not Coercion. Given space limits, I can make only one more point. In chapter four, Penner says that contemporary apologists are using a method that “doesn’t work” and is captive to modern assumptions about rationality. He charges that using evidence and argument in apologetics is an act of “violence” because it attempts to coerce people into believing in Christianity. This bizarre idea is based on the notion that any appeal to objective truth and the universal reach of reason is supported by the dominant ideology of the culture in which it operates. Thus, Christian apologists are unwittingly enslaved to a secular ideology that fails to recognize the value of persons, dialogue, and the deeply personal nature of Christian faith and devotion. This accusation is wildly wrong.

First, the basic principles of rationality (the laws of identity, noncontradiction, bivalence, and excluded middle) are not culture-bound or oppressive.⁹ They are the way God, as the Logos, thinks (John 1:1). Second, the apologist gives arguments for the truth and significance of Christianity. He does not make threats or use bribes, and nothing in the classical methods of apologetics would bid him to do so. There is no coercion. In my apologetic messages, I give the rational arguments in what I hope is a rhetorically sensitive manner, answer questions for a significant period of time, and stay long after for personal conversation. None of this is coercive.

Third, the idea that rational apologetics reinforces and is based on a false ideology is abjectly absurd. The apologist will challenge ideas that support the powerful elites and ideological forces of atheism, hedonism, scientism, relativism, and more. I recently debated an atheist at the University of Colorado at Boulder. In so doing, I was challenging secular ideology, not supporting it, and the school did not sponsor the debate!

Penner commits many more fallacies and routinely and unfairly impugns contemporary apologists in ways that I cannot address here. But in a few words, the book is philosophically wrong-headed and corrosive to Christian witness, since it denies the very meat of apologetic mission: God-given objective truth and rational argument sufficient to justify Christian belief before the watching world.

Douglas Groothuis is professor of philosophy at Denver Seminary, where he heads the apologetics and ethics program.

NOTES

- 1 See John Searle on postmodernism in *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1997).
- 2 "Douglas Groothuis" is referenced five times in the index.
- 3 Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity from the Challenges of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).
- 4 For more detail, see Groothuis, *Truth Decay*, "The Biblical View of Truth."
- 5 All Scripture quotations are from NIV.
- 6 Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011).
- 7 Like the postmodernists in whom he finds inspiration, Penner's writing is thickly occluded by qualifications, fuzziness, and elongated footnote digressions. It also is lacking in biblical citations.
- 8 For more, see Groothuis, *Truth Decay*, "The Truth about Truth."
- 9 While Penner repeatedly attacks "reason" and "rationality," he never explains just what he means by these terms, except to say they are generated by modern social forces and are, therefore, inauthentic for use in Christian apologetics. This is unconvincing.