

Luther's Use of Apologetics

Adam S. Francisco

The title of this paper may seem strange, for every good Lutheran knows that Luther considered reason deceitful and even dangerous to faith and theology; reason is, after all, “the devil’s prostitute.”¹ Apologetics employs reason to defend and even demonstrate the objectivity of the faith. Therefore, it can be assumed that Luther would be opposed to any sort of fact-based and rational apologetic.

This is, of course, a caricature of those among us who are skeptical of apologetics. No one has ever published such an argument. Yet spend enough time in the discipline of apologetics, and you will find your confessional friends distancing themselves from you because of your “rationalism,” your pietist friends expressing concern for your lack of spirituality, and the liberal acquaintances you keep (assuming they could tolerate having a friend like you in the first place) chuckling at your naive belief that something like objective truth exists in the first place.

The concern and even disdain some have for apologetics may be due, in part, to the apologist him—or her—self. Apologists (like some theologians) can be overbearing, obsessive, and arrogant as they pursue Peter’s exhortation to “honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense” but ignore the instruction to do it “with gentleness and respect” (1 Pet 3:15).² More common, however, is the objection coming from a culture of anti-intellectualism or a confusion of soteriology with epistemology manifesting itself in a type of fideism. Nevertheless, apologetics remains a biblical and necessary task.³

The church has always provided an apologetic witness to the faith. The Gospels were written so that readers could know and be “persuade[d] . . . that Jesus is the

¹ See Martin Luther, *Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments* (1525): vol. 40, p. 175, in *Luther’s Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–1976); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–1986); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009–), hereafter AE.

² Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (ESV), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

³ See David Scaer, “Apologetics as Theological Discipline: Reflections on a Necessary and Biblical Task,” in *Let Christ Be Christ: Theology, Ethics & World Religions in the Two Kingdoms: Essays in Honor of the Sixty-Fifth Birthday of Charles L. Manske*, ed. Daniel N. Harmelink (Huntington Beach: Tentatio Press, 1999), 299–308.

Adam S. Francisco is Professor and Chairman of the Department of History and Political Thought at Concordia University Irvine, Irvine, California. He may be contacted at adam.francisco@cui.edu.

Christ, God's Son, who came to save sinners."⁴ Paul customarily reasoned with Jews in their synagogues, argued for the truthfulness of the faith before babbling philosophers, and tried to persuade the authorities that Jesus rose from the dead, not in some metahistorical corner but as a matter of historical fact. When and where the gospel sounded like superstitious nonsense, the earliest Christians argued to the contrary. They insisted that it was (and is) not a cleverly devised myth but a confession of what God had done in time and space, as so many eyewitnesses had borne witness. While resistance to Christianity increased geographically and intellectually, apologists from Justin Martyr to Augustine persisted in their defense of and arguments for the truthfulness of the gospel.

Even after the Christianization of Europe in the Middle Ages, the need remained for answers to Jewish objections. An even greater challenge emerged with the geographical extension and belligerence of Islam. In the midst of the Crusades, Christians learned that unlike with the Jews and the Old Testament, they had little to no common ground to reason with Muslims. Thus, after translating and studying the Qur'an and other Islamic source material, they began to fashion polemics and new apologetic strategies for use with the Muslims in Spain and wherever else missionaries accompanying Crusaders might encounter them. It was probably the Muslims in Spain, and not merely some abstract audience of theologians, that Anselm had in my mind when he penned his *Cur Deus Homo* before the turn of the eleventh century.

The high Middle Ages also saw the theoretical side of apologetics taking shape. It began largely with Thomas Aquinas, who, in rejecting Anselm's ontological reasoning, established what remain today to be the primary ways one argues for the existence of God—from effect back to cause.⁵ These were hardly brought on by the questions of skeptics, since the existence of God was not really being questioned in that day. Yet, they were still important for thinking about the objective foundation for religious belief.

The apologetic challenges to the faith in Luther's day were virtually the same as the Middle Ages. Despite persistent persecution, Jewish populations continued to prosper. They asserted their own anti-Christian polemics and apologetic arguments, persuading Christians to embrace a form of Judaism for Gentiles called Sabbatarianism. The challenge of Islam also persisted during this time. However, in the sixteenth century, it was a much more pressing matter than it had ever been before, for the Ottoman Turks began pushing deep into the heart of Europe. By 1530, Luther complained that the Turks were at Germany's very doorstep, and

⁴ See *The Lutheran Study Bible* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 1572.

⁵ See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1, q. 2, art. 3.

he feared that many Christians would, for any number of reasons, be enticed to embrace Islam.⁶ To these two great apologetic challenges, Luther wrote a variety of responses.

Interestingly, studies specifically addressing his apologetics all but fail to consider them. Avery Dulles's *A History of Apologetics*, for example, argues, "Martin Luther . . . constructed no formal system of apologetics. Not only would this have been foreign to his main purpose—the inner reform of the Church—but it ran counter to his idea of the relations between faith and reason."⁷ At best, continues Dulles,

his system did perhaps make room for a type of apologetic constructed from within faith. The development of such apologetics—which would show the inner power of faith from the standpoint of the believer—would have to wait for authors such as Kierkegaard and Barth, both of whom were strongly influenced by Luther's dynamic and existential concept of reason.⁸

Although he seemed unaware of Dulles's work, Siegbert Becker characterized this as an existentialist and neo-orthodox interpretation of Luther in his monograph *The Foolishness of God*. In a chapter titled "Luther's Apologetics," he summarized the reformer's approach as being that of a Biblicist. "After all is said and done," wrote Becker, "the whole of Luther's apologetics can still be adequately summed up in a sentence which he wrote into the margin of his copy of the works of Peter Lombard, 'Arguments based on reason determine nothing, but because Holy Scripture says that it is true, it is true.'"⁹

There is one other primary interpretation, coming from a long-forgotten German-Lutheran apologist named Otto Zöckler. His dense volume on the history of apologetics treats Luther briefly but gets to the heart of the reformer's theology and epistemology in this description: "The best foundation for all defenses of Christianity is expressed in this sentence: Jesus Christ alone satisfies the need for salvation *and* at the same time man's need for truth."¹⁰ The implications of such a statement have been thoroughly explored and exploited by John Warwick Montgomery. For him, if Luther had an apologetic system, it would start "the search for God . . . at the connecting link between earth and heaven which exists at the point of the

⁶ Luther, *Preface to George of Hungary, On the Turks* (1530), AE 59:261.

⁷ Avery Dulles, *A History of Apologetics* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1999), 113.

⁸ Dulles, *A History of Apologetics*, 114.

⁹ Siegbert W. Becker, *The Foolishness of God: The Place of Reason in the Theology of Martin Luther* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1982), 191. The chapter from which this quotation comes was originally published (under the same title, "Luther's Apologetics") in *Concordia Theological Monthly* 29 (October 1958): 742–759.

¹⁰ Otto Zöckler, *Geschichte der Apologie des Christentums* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1907), 309–310.

incarnation . . . absolute truth is available only here. . . . The *point depart* must be Christ.”¹¹ Believe what you want, but the method (or system) Montgomery has developed—which is probably most completely outlined in his *Tractatus Logico-Theologicus*—drives unapologetically and robustly from evidence to the incarnation to establish an objective epistemological basis for the Christian faith.

Luther’s theology does not lead to fideism (faith in faith) and may well permit such a comprehensive apologetic. What is interesting in many, if not all, of the discussions of Luther’s view of and approach to apologetics is that none of them actually explore his use of apologetics. Instead, they deduce from his theology what his apologetic might have been had he lived in the modern world. Alternatively, they speculate as to what it would not have been. An example of this can be found in an article by H. Wayne House, who asked (and answered) the question “How would Luther react to much of modern apologetics? . . . He would repudiate it . . . [He] would say that” an evidential or rational apologetic “caters to a theology of glory.”¹²

Such conclusions are speculative. Luther was never faced with the rank unbelief that modern apologetics addresses today. One thing that is for certain is that after a thorough reading of Luther, one sees a man who is principled, yet often pragmatic, and even creative in his approach to things. There were not many atheists in Luther’s Germany, nor were there demythologizing higher critics. But, as has already been mentioned, there were Jews and Muslims. In his work addressing each on a variety of occasions, we see Luther the reformer of the Christian church operating as apologist for the faith.

Before describing these works, though, a brief definition of apologetics and Luther’s understanding of the defense of the faith is in order. First, let apologetics be defined as a defense of Christianity over against objections to it, in a context where the objections come from a decidedly non-Christian perspective (and not a different Christian confession). Leander Keyser, a professor of systematic theology and apologetics at Hamma Divinity School in the early twentieth century, helpfully distinguished the former from the latter by describing apologetics as contention with “infidels outside of the Christian Church” and polemics as debate “with heretics within the church.”¹³ Kurt Marquart described apologetics as distinct from theology proper. The latter is derived from revelation; apologetics is, in a way, prolegomena to theology. He went on to add that such prolegomena to theology are “perfectly valid, indeed necessary.” Before the non-Christian, it is necessary “to reason

¹¹ John Warwick Montgomery, “The Apologetic Thrust of Lutheran Theology,” *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 11, no. 1 (1970): 27–28. Emphasis original.

¹² H. Wayne House, “The Value of Reason in Luther’s View of Apologetics,” *Concordia Journal* 7, no. 2 (1981): 66.

¹³ Leander Keyser, *A System of Christian Evidence* (Burlington, IA: The Lutheran Literary Board, 1922), 23.

from the common ground of public information and argument.”¹⁴ To put it another way, apologetics as generally defined here takes place in a realm where quotations from the New Testament, historical theologians (including Luther or the confessions), or ecclesiastical bylaws do not resolve differences. Luther himself noted in his great commentary on Galatians that when you are in this arena, when you have to “engage in controversy with Jews, Turks, etc.,” quoting the Bible is of little use. “You must use all your cleverness and effort and be as profound and subtle a controversialist as possible; for then you are in another area.”¹⁵ That is, you must use your reason, you must appeal to facts and be as precise and logical as possible (or at least as the context demands).

Such a task, for Luther, is not merely for apologetic specialists, who can cite chapter and verse of the Book of Mormon or the Qur’an. Nor is it merely for those who have too much free time and can spend countless hours debating in internet chat rooms (if there are such things anymore), commenting on blogs, or participating in high profile debates exposing the irrationality of Richard Dawkins. Neither is it just for seminarians, theologians, or those masquerading as theologians. The apologetic task, for Luther, is for every Christian. Commenting on 1 Peter 3:15 (“In your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you”), Luther wrote, “Here we shall have to admit that St. Peter is addressing these words to all Christians, to priests, lay [people], men and women, young and old, and in whatever station they are. Therefore it follows from this that every Christian should account for his faith and be able to give a reason and an answer when necessary.”¹⁶

Luther's earliest apologetic opponents were the Jews. Not much is known about his personal contact with them, but his early work demonstrates that he was well aware of their historical suffering and persecution and thoroughly acquainted with their beliefs. There is evidence that he had some personal contact with a few rabbis and had a heated epistolary exchange with probably the most influential Jew of his day—Josel of Rosheim. As he grew older and his contemporary Jews resisted the gospel he preached, and as he learned of Jewish anti-Christian and sensationalist polemics, he grew ever more impatient (and agitated). This is the anti-Jewish Luther most people know. In his early work, however, he expressed hope that they might be converted. In his lectures on Romans, he wrote that even though they had thrown

¹⁴ Kurt Marquart, *Anatomy of an Explosion: A Theological Analysis of the Missouri Synod Conflict* (Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1977), 128.

¹⁵ Luther, *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), AE 26:29–30.

¹⁶ Luther, *Sermons on the First Epistle of St. Peter* (1522), AE 30:105.

“Christ out to the Gentiles,” he was confident that should they hear a clear exposition of the gospel from the Old Testament, they might “receive him among the Gentiles.”¹⁷

After Luther was thrown out of the Roman church, rumors started circulating that he had been influenced by Jewish ideas. At the Diet of Nuremberg in 1522, he was even accused of rejecting the virgin birth. His response, *That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew* (1523), cleared the air of that and other false accusations. It was also written so that a Jew, too, might find his arguments compelling. He wrote,

If I had been a Jew and had seen such dolts and blockheads govern and teach the Christian faith, I would sooner have become a hog than a Christian. . . . They have dealt with the Jews as if they were dogs rather than human beings. . . . I hope that if one deals in a kindly way with the Jews and instructs them carefully from holy scripture, many of them will become genuine Christians. . . . When we are inclined to boast of our position we should remember that we are but Gentiles, while the Jews are of the lineage of Christ.¹⁸

We know of at least one Jew, a man named Bernhard Gipher, who came to study in Wittenberg, who became a Christian after reading Luther’s treatise.¹⁹

Early in the 1530s, despite what he thought were his best efforts, Luther began to grow weary of the general resistance of Jews to the gospel. He had also learned of their efforts to convert Christians in Moravia, Bohemia, and Poland, and was convinced that the appearance of the Sabbatarians was a result of their activity. Therefore, he wrote *Against the Sabbatarians* in 1538 to demonstrate the error of Jewish theology so that Christians would be able to make a defense of the Christian faith. This led to a response from the Jewish community in the form of a booklet that attacked the divinity of Jesus, the virginity of Mary, and Christian exegesis of the Old Testament, to which Luther responded in his notorious works of 1543—*On the Jews and Their Lies*, *On the Ineffable Name*, and *On the Last Words of Jesus*. These were Luther’s last statement against Jewish theology. And while the vitriol is inexcusable, it is entirely typical for the context—from the polemics of both sides. Certainly, it is interesting that in less than three years, right before his death, he would again advocate from the pulpit that Christians should treat the Jews kindly but would still insist that the Jews need to turn from their blasphemy, embrace Christ, and be baptized. Such was the often paradoxical and conflicted mind of Luther on the subject of the Jews.

¹⁷ Luther, *Lectures on Romans* (1516), AE 25:430.

¹⁸ Luther, *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew* (1523), AE 45:200–201.

¹⁹ Pekka Huhtinen, “Luther and World Mission: A Review,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 65, no. 1 (2001): 25n26.

In any case, his apologetic against Judaism was singularly focused on the person of Jesus and whether he was in fact the promised Messiah. From *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew* to his later polemics, he advised that since “the Jews do not accept the evangelists we must confront them with other evidence.”²⁰ He thus worked primarily from the Old Testament, being careful to show that he did not impose a christological reading on the text and demonstrating that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and die just as Jesus suffered and died—an event Jews knew from history. He was convinced that, despite the functional Marcionism²¹ of much of Christianity, the patriarchs and prophets of old were Christians in faith and fact, though maybe not in name. Thus, he tried to show and illustrate for Christians who had dealings with Jews “a method and some passages from Scripture . . . they should employ in dealing with them.”²²

For his Jewish audience, he sought to show both the “true faith” of the ancient Hebrew people, using *prima facie* evidence from their own sacred text, and that rabbinic theology was based on tortured grammar and exegesis. You could say he offered a system of Christian evidences for the Jews and for potential missionaries to the Jews. One twentieth-century Luther scholar went so far as to describe Luther as the “father of Protestant Jewish missions.”²³ That is a stretch, but there is scholarly consensus that the most fundamental aspect of Luther’s writings on the Jews had an “apologetic missionary tendency” to persuade them to return to the faith of their ancient fathers.²⁴

However, Luther’s apologetic contest with Jews was not just an argument over the meaning of the Hebrew text. This was, in the estimate of many Hebraists and Old Testament scholars, impressive. Interestingly, Luther also used historical evidence to bolster his argument. In the three works from 1543, he used the gospels not as sacred script but as eyewitness testimony alongside ancient Jewish authors such as Josephus and Philo. He did this to demonstrate the weakness of Jewish theology and its claims to antiquity and, more positively, to provide evidence from miracles for the messianic credentials of Jesus. “Whoever is not moved by this miraculous spectacle,” he wrote, “deserves to remain blind.”²⁵ Finally, in conclusion to his argument against Judaism and apologia for Christianity, he wrote, “My essays,

²⁰ Luther, *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew* (1523), AE 45:208.

²¹ This term is from Daniel L. Gard, “The Church’s Scripture and Functional Marcionism,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 74 (July 2010): 209–224, and refers to the fact that many Christians do not preach or teach the Old Testament to any significant degree.

²² Luther, *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew* (1523), AE 45:213.

²³ Armas K. E. Holmio, *Martin Luther: Friend or Foe of the Jews?* (Chicago: National Lutheran Council, 1949), 16.

²⁴ Mark U. Edwards Jr., *Luther’s Last Battles: Politics and Polemics, 1531–46* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 366.

²⁵ Luther, *On the Jews and Their Lies* (1543), AE 47:300.

I hope, will furnish a Christian (who in any case has no desire to become a Jew) with enough material not only to defend himself against the blind, venomous Jews, but also to become the foe of the Jews,” so that they might understand their belief is false.²⁶

Luther’s apologetic to Judaism was fairly traditional, learned from the medieval scholastic tradition that began in the thirteenth century with Raymond Martini, Nicholas of Lyra, Salvagus Prochetus, and the Jewish convert Paul of Burgos.²⁷ His argument with Islam was likewise part of the scholastic tradition, but it included some of his own innovations. The expansion of the Ottoman Empire into Central Europe was the catalyst for his engagement with Islam. From 1521 until the end of Luther’s life, the Turks forced their way into Hungary with their sights trained on Germany. The 1529 Siege of Vienna, in particular, frightened everyone, for, as Luther expressed, it placed the Turks and their religion next door to the Holy Roman Empire.²⁸ Accompanying the annexations of much of Hungary was the Islamization of Eastern Europe. The conversion of the cathedral into a mosque in Buda, many thought, was but a foreshadowing of events to come. Luther was convinced that if the final judgment did not occur soon, the world would become Muslim.

The Ottoman advance and annexation of Eastern and parts of Central Europe brought Christians and Muslims into close contact. Muslim enclaves appeared in Hungary, and many Christians who found themselves subject to the Turks began to assume “Islam without having much of a choice in the matter.”²⁹ There were even reports of violent efforts to proselytize among the inhabitants of southern Hungary. Some willingly embraced Islam. I have “heard and read,” wrote Luther, “that many Christians have committed apostasy and willingly and without force believed the faith of the Turks or Muhammad.”³⁰

The expansion of what Luther called the Muhammadan Empire made it vital for Christians to be able to respond intelligently to Islam, so he began to write about it. His first work was titled *On War Against the Turk* and was published in 1529, on the eve of the Siege of Vienna. His chief purpose in writing it was to explain and encourage war—properly conceived according to the doctrine of just war—against the Turks. He likewise provided a little synopsis of Islamic teaching. Shortly afterward, he penned another little work, *Muster-Sermon Against the Turk*, the second half of which was, as Luther wrote, for “Germans already captive in Turkey

²⁶ Luther, *On the Jews and Their Lies* (1543), AE 47:305–306.

²⁷ Edwards, *Luther’s Last Battles*, 128.

²⁸ Luther, *Preface to George of Hungary* (1530), AE 59:261.

²⁹ Allen Hertz, “Muslims, Christians and Jews in Sixteenth-Century Belgrade,” in *The Mutual Effects of the Islamic and Judeo-Christian Worlds: The East European Pattern*, eds. Abraham Ascher, Tibor Halasi-Kun, and Béla Király (New York: Brooklyn College Press, 1979), 149.

³⁰ Luther, *Muster-Sermon Against the Turk* (1529), WA 30/2:185.

or those who might still become captive.”³¹ In this work, he provided basic advice to Christians on how to live as Christians amid Muslims, especially under the restrictions of Sharia law. Over a decade later, after he helped publish a Latin translation of the Qur'an and other Islamic literature so that Christians could learn about Islam from primary texts, he worked on a very loose translation of what was the most influential medieval scholastic apologetic directed against Islam. He titled the resulting work *Refutation of the Koran* and published it for two reasons.³² First, so that, he explained, “if this booklet should, whether by the press or through the preachers, come before those who are struggling against the Turks or who are already subject to the Turks or who must become their subjects hereafter, they will be able to defend themselves against the faith of Mohammed, even if they were unable to defend themselves against his sword.”³³ He hoped it would equip Christians in the task of apologetics so that, as he wrote, they might be “lion hearts” in defense of the gospel.³⁴ Second, the published text of the *Refutation* stated that a purpose of the book was to bring those led astray by the Qur'an and Islam back to God.³⁵

The *Refutation* followed a distinct method for arguing with Islam. As the published text put it, “One must not deal with [Muslims] at first by asserting and defending the high articles of our faith . . . but rather with this approach: take and diligently work with their Qur'an, demonstrating their law to be false and useless.”³⁶ Afterward, one should argue for the veracity of Christianity. More than the first half of the *Refutation* argues against the Qur'an by showing that it cannot be construed as a legitimate revelation from God by a rational person for the following reasons: The Qur'an claims, in a way, to supersede the Torah, Psalms, and Gospels; but neither the Old or New Testament bear witness to the Qur'an. In addition, it does not cohere with any biblical doctrine, it contradicts itself, it has not been confirmed by miraculous signs, it even contradicts common sense reason, there are obvious lies in it, it promotes murder, it is disorderly, it is shameful, and the history of its composition is dubious.³⁷

The last few chapters of the *Refutation* are the most interesting, for they attempt to demonstrate Christian doctrine from a few ambiguous passages of the Qur'an.

³¹ Luther, *Muster-Sermon Against the Turk* (1529), WA 30/2:185.

³² See Luther's preface and afterword to Brother Richard, O. P. [Riccoldo da Monte di Croce], *Refutation of the Koran* [ca. 1301] (1542), AE 60:251–266.

³³ Luther, preface and afterword to Brother Richard, *Refutation of the Koran* (1542), AE 60:261–262.

³⁴ Luther, letter to the city council of Basel (Oct. 27, 1542), WA Br 10:162.

³⁵ Brother Richard, *Refutation of the Koran* (1542), WA 53:278.

³⁶ Brother Richard, *Refutation of the Koran* (1542), WA 53:284.

³⁷ Cf. Brother Richard, *Refutation of the Koran* (1542), WA 53:378.

The author believed that the Holy Spirit caused Muhammad unwittingly to express Christian doctrine. For example, he pointed out the consistent use of the first person plural with reference to God's speech. From this, he used passages like Qur'an 4:171, where Jesus is referred to as the word of God (*kalimatullah*) born of a virgin through the work of the spirit of God (*ruhallah*) to suggest that the Qur'an can be made to express a convoluted doctrine of the Trinity. The Qur'an also suggests that the Torah, Psalms, and Gospels are legitimate revelations from God.³⁸ He then added to this that the biblical books should have priority, and he pointed out that, at the very least, Muslims were compelled by their own scripture to read and believe them.³⁹

For Luther's time, the *Refutation* was the most sophisticated apologetic against Islam available. The Latin text that Luther translated and adopted persisted and informed the first modern apologetic treatise written by Hugo Grotius about a century later, *On the Truth of the Christian Religion*. The real value of the *Refutation* for understanding Luther's approach to apologetics, though, is that it suggests a much more pragmatic Luther than the Biblicist some have characterized him to be. Additionally, that Luther borrowed and took his cues from a scholastic treatise suggests he was no pre-Kierkegaardian existentialist. Rather, he was a traditional apologist, who received and passed on the basic scholastic approach to apologetics against Jews and Muslims, mixed with a few of his own innovations.

It is undeniable that Luther used and recognized the need for apologetics. He, in fact, believed all Christians should be prepared to give a reason for the hope within them. It would be strange for a man so confident in the objectivity of the faith to dismiss it. This—and not the existentialism or neo-orthodox influences that came later—was the spirit of the reformers. They were not dogmatists (though they held fast to certain dogmas). They kept an open mind, relative to the time. Luther, for example, always kept himself in check by asking the question “Am I alone wise?” Lyndal Roper describes him this way:

For Luther, doubt always accompanied faith. . . . [I]n one debate, Luther suddenly became unsure that he was right, and he left the room, falling on his bed and praying. . . . He was utterly engaged in the subject under discussion, and shaken to the core by the thought that he might have been mistaken.⁴⁰

³⁸ Muslims invented the doctrine of *tahrif* to explain the obvious contradictions, effectively altering, if not contradicting, the Qur'an's claims.

³⁹ Brother Richard, *Refutation* (1542), WA 53:364–388.

⁴⁰ Lyndal Roper, *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet* (New York: Random House, 2017), 422.

This was characteristic, she contends, of his “extraordinary openness” and “honest willingness to put everything on the line.”⁴¹

Luther and the other reformers were convinced the truth was discoverable, even by the unregenerate. The “second Martin” (Martin Chemnitz) wrote,

It is absolutely clear that the mind in itself has not been deprived of all understanding, and there remains in even unregenerate men some ability of the mind to perceive and judge those things which are subject to reason and the senses . . . God willed that some of these gifts should remain in the mind, whence man could consider both what God is and what he is like; likewise, in order that there can be instruction to lead us to Christ.⁴²

Or, as Luther put it in the catechism, God has given us our reason and our senses and still preserves them (SC II 2). The thesis that scholars like Avery Dulles have advanced—namely, that the reformer was skeptical of apologetics—is simply untenable. So, too, is Becker's thesis that Luther would only go as far as biblical proof-texting, even if it was done in such a way as to show the internal consistency of Christian doctrine.

It should also be added that Luther would not have rejected wholesale the way apologetics developed in the centuries after him. He approved and made use of the scholastic apologetic tradition, and thus he could not conceive of an epistemology being developed apart from certain theistic ontological assumptions, as so many of the thinkers of the enlightenment tried to do. (They failed, by the way. There is no such thing as absolute neutrality, especially in the realm of religion.⁴³)

Nevertheless, despite his premodern worldview, there is enough material in Luther to suggest he was confident that inductive reasoning from the effects and teleology of the cosmos would lead one to conclude that a deity caused it all. For example, he wrote,

The more observant among the philosophers drew from this source [the cosmos] what is in truth not an insignificant proof: that all things are done and guided, not planlessly but by divine providence, inasmuch as the movements of the masses on high and of the heaven are so definite and unique. Who would say that they are accidental or purely a matter of nature, when the objects

⁴¹ Roper, *Martin Luther*, 410.

⁴² Martin Chemnitz, *Loci Theologici*, trans. J. A. O. Preus (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1989), 233.

⁴³ Roy A. Clouser, *The Myth of Religious Neutrality* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005).

fashioned by artisans—such as round or three-cornered or six-cornered columns—are not accidental but the result of a definite plan and skill?⁴⁴

There are numerous other places in Luther where additional forms of the *a posteriori* arguments for God's existence are expressed. To be sure, at best, these arguments only established the existence of a "Supreme Being." "It is [still] interesting to observe," however, wrote N. Arne Bendtz, "how far Luther sometimes can go in recognizing man's knowledge of God unaided by revelation. It is raised above all doubts that man's knowledge leads him to the acceptance of the existence of God."⁴⁵

In Luther's mind, natural knowledge of God served two purposes. On one hand, as Henry Eyster Jacobs wrote over a century ago, it kept "man from becoming like brutes which perish. It constantly reminds him of a higher standard than is attainable under the mere light of Nature . . . and it impels man ever onward in his search for truth and for God." On the other hand, natural knowledge or natural theology "is like writing that needs the intervention of a lens in order to be legible by one whose sight is failing. Some facts indeed are known, but they are misapprehended and viewed in wrong relations; and the most important are entirely wanting."⁴⁶

For Luther, then, lucid and certain knowledge of God comes from his word, particularly in the person of his Word made flesh who dwelt among us. Luther wrote,

This is why Paul makes such a frequent practice of linking Jesus Christ with God the Father, to teach us what is the true . . . religion. It does not begin at the top, as all other religions do; it begins at the bottom. It bids us climb up by Jacob's ladder . . . Therefore . . . put away all speculations about the Majesty, all thoughts of works, traditions, and philosophy . . . And you must run directly to the manger and the mother's womb, embrace this Infant and Virgin's Child in your arms, and look at Him—born, being nursed, growing up, going about in human society, teaching, dying, rising again, ascending above all the heavens, and having authority over all things.⁴⁷

It seems that if Luther would have developed an apologetic system to demonstrate that Christianity was not a cleverly devised myth, he would have approached it from the incarnation, factually or historically, for this is what sets Christianity

⁴⁴ Luther, *Lectures on Genesis (1535–1545/1544–1554)*, AE 1:25.

⁴⁵ N. Arne Bendtz, "Faith and Knowledge in Luther's Theology," in *Reformation Studies: Sixteen Essays in Honor of Roland H. Bainton*, ed. Franklin H. Littell (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1962), 22–23.

⁴⁶ Henry Eyster Jacobs, *A Summary of the Christian Faith* (Philadelphia: General Council Publication House, 1905), 7–8.

⁴⁷ Luther, *Lectures on Galatians (1535)*, AE 26:30.

apart from all other religions and worldviews. This was not just a dogmatic or doctrinal point he was making. He believed it was also the tremendous epistemological difference that Christianity makes. Apologetics, then, was for Luther an essential part of the life of the mind. It was especially essential for those in ecclesiastical vocations or public ministry. In his preface to the Qur'an, he wrote,

There can be no thought of leisure, especially for those of us who teach in the church. We must fight everywhere against the armies of the devil. How many different enemies have we seen in our own time?—the defenders of the pope's idols, the Jews, a multitude of Anabaptist monstrosities, the party of Servetus, and others. Let us now prepare ourselves against Mohammed as well. But what will we be able to say concerning things of which we are ignorant? That is why it is beneficial for learned people to read the writings of their enemies—so that they may more accurately refute, strike, and overturn those writings, so that they may be able to correct some of them, or at least to fortify our own people with stronger arguments.⁴⁸

Apologists can certainly be quirky, obsessive, and even myopic at times. That is no reason to scuttle the enterprise, and it is no reason for Lutherans to puff up their chests and act as if they had Luther's approval (as if Luther's approval is needed anyway). For Luther and his heirs really do have a word for the world, even the world of unbelief. It is especially to the latter, like Luther to the Jews and the distant Turks, that the apologist speaks. How does he speak? In a creative and factually persuasive way, so that, as St. Paul put it to King Agrippa, he might persuade those who hear him to be Christians.

⁴⁸ Luther, *Preface to Theodor Bibliander's Edition of the Koran* (1543), AE 60:294.



Pastors, are you interested in deepening your practice of pastoral ministry?

The CTSFW Doctor of Ministry Program combines biblical and theological study with structured reflection on pastoral practice to develop your understanding and skills as a minister of Christ.

Recently the program has been redesigned to make it more affordable, accessible and practical. Courses meet for five days on campus, for a time to be refreshed by study, collegiality and worship in chapel, while not keeping you away from your ministry settings for extended periods. The program culminates in a dissertation project which benefits your congregation and serves as a process for systematic growth in pastoral practice.



For more information contact:

Dr. Gifford A. Grobien

Director, Doctor of Ministry Program
Concordia Theological Seminary
6600 N. Clinton St.
Fort Wayne, IN 46825

Gifford.Grobien@ctsfw.edu
260.452.2143
Apply at www.ctsfw.edu/D-Min

