# Speaking Christian: toward a post-secular apologetics

## Introduction: Religious? Spiritual? Secular? *Post*-Secular?

In June 2021, following widespread online abuse of three BAME England footballers involved in England's unsuccessful penalty shoot-out in the Euro final against Italy, the Guardian newspaper revealed an interesting fact about the individuals concerned.

As Dr Selina Stone, lecturer in Political Theology at St Mellitus college, commented to the newspaper:

> *[Bukeyo] Saka, [Raheem] Sterling and [Marcus] Rashford are embodying the best of the black British Christian tradition … There is a deep commitment to religion and spirituality even among younger millennials who are no longer formally in church. For Saka, Rashford and Sterling, there is clearly a recognition that there is something of God's blessing on them for them to be where they are, along with a recognition that, having been so blessed, they have to take responsibility for helping others … In some Christian practice there is a sense that faith is about assenting to a set of beliefs – you read the liturgy, recite the creeds, assent to doctrine. Black Christian traditions are more about the embodiment of faith, how you live out what you say in a Sunday service, how you are attentive to the felt needs of people around you as part of your faith commitment.* (Coman, 2021)

The fact that the Guardian judged the players' religious commitment to be newsworthy reflects an important issue, since in many respects it might be regarded as counter-cultural. Against a national culture widely assumed to be largely post-Christian (with mainstream religious attendance continuing to decline), here were significant parts of the population, including younger generations, either actively practising or identifying as religious. But this also draws attention to a wide diversity and variation between different ethnic groups and religious traditions: other evidence confirms that Britons from BAME backgrounds – Christians, Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs – tend to regard religion as more important to them than their white compatriots (Katwala, 2021).

**How important, if at all, is religion or faith in your life?**

| | All | White | BME |
|---|---|---|---|
| Very important | 17 | 14 | 39 |
| Somewhat important | 16 | 15 | 21 |
| A little important | 22 | 23 | 17 |
| Not at all important | 41 | 44 | 17 |
| Don't know | 4 | 4 | 7 |

Polling by *Number Cruncher Politics* on 25 January–14 February 2021 (when 2,000 ethnic minority and 1,501 white respondents were interviewed)

Further trends render this picture even more complex. You may be familiar with the way some people describe themselves as 'spiritual but not religious'. One example of

that appeared when English Heritage recently announced a daily 'hour of contemplation' in September and October 2021 at several of its monastic sites including Lindisfarne Priory , Furness Abbey and Wenlock Priory. '*English Heritage will be encouraging visitors to turn off notifications on their phones, finish up their conversations and enjoy the final hour of public access to its abbeys and priories in contemplative quiet, enabling them to experience these spiritual buildings as they were intended.'* (English Heritage, 2021)

It is perhaps ironic that a commentary has been provided by Stephen Fry, celebrated secular humanist! But on the other hand, this simply serves to highlight the complexity of this campaign. While it is being promoted as a (non-religious) venture in support of people's mental health, we can still regard it as part of the flourishing contemporary fascination with forms of spiritual practices, including mindfulness, meditation, pilgrimages and retreats. The strapline for the programme is 'Be Present in the Past', suggesting that people may still look to the 'spiritual capital' of the historic sites and heritage of Christianity in order to connect to the sacred and manage their mental well-being.

But what do the statistics say? We are still waiting for one significant indicator, the results of the 2021 general census, but interim figures in two areas may give some indication. Again, they serve to confirm the trajectory of decline, not only in formal religious affiliation, but (perhaps more worryingly) in general interest in religious issues within the population as a whole.

First, according to statistics released in 2019, the number of people in Britain who say they have 'no religion' has increased by around 46% between 2011-18. The data from the Office for National Statistics show the number of non-religious people has increased by nearly a half since 2011 to 39% of the population, with nearly 8 million more people now saying they have no religion. The results also showed a 15% decline in the number of people who say they are Christian (all denominations). People who said they were Muslim grew by 22%, Jewish 17% and Hindu 13% (Office for National Statistics, 2019).

Second, interest in studying Religious Studies also appears to be in decline. As one indication, here are the figures for June examination entries for Religious Studies GCE A (Advanced) and AS (Advanced Level, England and Wales, 2015-21:

| Year | A Level England | A Level Wales | AS Level England | AS Level Wales |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2015 | 21,577 | 1,795 | 34,830 | 2,535 |
| 2016 | 22,957 | 1,892 | 33,234 | 2,446 |
| 2017 | 22,121 | 1,735 | 14,324 | 1,984 |
| 2018 | 17,024 | 1,398 | 4,248 | 1,776 |
| 2019 | 16,214 | 1,276 | 2,462 | 1,449 |
| 2020 | 14,564 | 1,126 | 1,658 | 1,312 |
| 2021 | 15,659 | 986 | 1,215 | 1,233 |

(Source: Joint Council for Qualifications)

So in all these examples, we can see a range of evidence, including the persistence of faith in the face of religious decline; continuing religious pluralism and the emergence

of what we might term the 'secular sacred'. (Knott, 2013) The last annual report of *British Social Attitudes* to focus on religion, in 2019, summarised these trends in these terms:

> *The past two decades have seen international conflict involving religion and domestic religious organisations putting themselves at odds with mainstream values. Against this backdrop, we … find a dramatic decline in identification with Christian denominations, particularly the Church of England; a substantial increase in atheism and in self-description as "very" or "extremely" non-religious; and very low confidence in religious organisations, but tolerance of religious difference.*
>
> *Over time, there has been a dramatic decline in the proportion of people who identify with Christianity along with a substantial increase in those with no religious affiliation, and a steady increase in those belonging to non-Christian faiths.* (NatCen Social Research, 2019)

If we were to extrapolate from this, we might conclude that our situation (at least here in the West) is a combination of the decline of formal affiliation within mainstream denominations, together with an undercurrent of mistrust towards organised religion; the continuing reality of religious pluralism; plus the rise of various forms of 'non-religion' (Lee, 2015) and secular spirituality.

One way of thinking about the current state of religion in the West is to frame it in the paradigm of the so-called 'postsecular' (Habermas, 2008; Barbieri, 2014; Graham, 2013). This is an attempt to capture the signs of religious resurgence while noting the resilience of secularism and religious scepticism as the default position for public sentiment. In a world that is increasingly aware of the persistence of religion, yet often struggles to accommodate it into secular discourse, how are these seemingly contradictory discourses to be managed? And what should be the response of people of faith, including the churches? How do we justify the very relevance of faith to a culture that no longer grants it much privilege or credence? This lecture will explore the suggestion that the churches need to learn again to 'speak Christian' (Borg, 2011) in this context, and the way to do this might be to recover the ancient practices of Christian apologetics as a form of public, theological witness to the practical value of faith, articulated in both deed *and* word.

**Anatomy of the Postsecular**

For most of the second half of the twentieth century, the gradual marginalization of religious belief and institutions and the privatization of religious belief and practice formed the mainstay of social scientific thinking about religion. The dynamics of secularization were of course the matter of debate, but broadly the consensus was that it wove together a number of threads. First, the gradual separation or differentiation of religious institutions (such as the Christian church in the West) from mainstream

society – so for example, the removal of education, welfare, morality, even rites of passage from the hands of religious institutions into those of the State. Second, it described the process of declining participation and belief in religious practices and dogmas on an individual level; and third the general privatization of religion within the moral, cultural and intellectual life of any society (Berger, Davie and Fokas, 2008).

But alongside these secularising trends, and where the twenty-first century situation confounds the sociological orthodoxy of the mid- to late twentieth century, is the unexpected and unprecedented re-emergence of religion onto the global political scene. One of the characteristics of the past thirty years has been the way in which religion has become newly visible and experienced as a global phenomenon of considerable political and cultural power -- for good and ill.

### *i. New Visibility, Continuing Vitality*

From the last quarter of the twentieth century the world began to see the unexpected 're-enchantment' of global politics – something we can probably date from the Iranian revolution in 1979, the rise of the Moral Majority in the US in the 1980s, the emergence of Islamist movements in the Middle East, Africa and South Asia. Clearly, the destruction of the World Trade Center twenty years ago on 11th September 2001 stands as an iconic and devastating moment in all this, as an explicitly-religiously motivated intervention in world affairs. Globally speaking, the rise of forms of Islamism, especially in the Middle East, East Asia and Africa, and of Hindu nationalism in India,

represent examples of the ways in which religion, far from receding to the margins of our political consciousness, has now erupted with unprecedented force.

But even within the West, where institutional Christian (but not other religions) decline appears to confirm the basis of 20th century secularization theory, religion is reasserting its visibility within political discourse, as well as colonising new spaces and generating new alliances and social movements. Ironically, cuts in government funding since the economic crisis of 2008-9 have furnished the churches with opportunities to 'push back against the pressures of secularization' (Kettell 2015, 69) by offering buildings, resources and volunteers as statutory facilities are withdrawn. Recent research for the Woolf Institute's 'Trust in Crisis' project highlights the 'quiet yet remarkable' presence of faith-communities, often in seriously marginalised urban neighbourhoods, arguing that '… *it is local communities and locally-based volunteer organisations which confront direct and immediate needs in times of crisis. They are more in tune with realities on the ground and are able to plug the gaps left by austerity.*' (Bock and Everett 2017, 13) Religion continues to be a potent force in many aspects of global civil society, therefore, and is increasingly identified by governments as a significant source of social capital and political mobilization.

### ***ii. Long-Term Decline***

Yet whilst religion may be newly visible and somewhat disconcerting to Enlightenment ideals of a neutral public square, its resurgent forms are very different from anything

resembling a return to Christendom such as existed in medieval and early modern Europe. The religious landscape is far more diverse and complex.

For a start, talk of resurgence must be tempered by unequivocal evidence of drastic decline in the institutional strength of organized Christianity in the West. I have already cited the latest British Social Attitudes survey, but this is just another staging-post in what the poet Matthew Arnold called the 'melancholy, long, withdrawing roar' of the tides of faith. According to the 2011 Census for England and Wales, Christianity is still the largest religion, claiming 33.2 million people (59.3 per cent of the population); but this still represents a decline from 71.7 per cent a decade earlier. Within the same period, the proportion of those reporting 'no religion' has increased from 14.8 per cent to 25.1 per cent, which is around 14.1 million people (Pew Forum 2015).

### *iii. Mutation and Fluidity of Religion*

But 'faith' itself, even within a Christian context, cannot easily be mapped back onto the old churchgoing patterns of the 1950s. It is commonplace to hear people describe themselves as 'Spiritual but not Religious'. This is particularly amongst younger generations, and reflected in the statistics on their religious outlooks and affiliations (ComRes 2013). Similarly, while patterns of religious observance and affiliation may be declining at an accelerating rate (National Centre for Social Research 2019), other indicators suggest greater complexity. So while people still record high levels of belief in some kind of supernatural or divine being; whilst they may pray regularly, much of

the rest of their religious lives are far more heterodox (believing in lots of very diverse things) than orthodox. So '41% of us now believe in angels, 53% in an afterlife and 70% in a soul' (Woodhead 2014, 54), and belief in angels, or reincarnation will accompany interest in traditional forms of spirituality such as making pilgrimages and retreats or singing Christmas carols. (Spencer and Weldin 2012, 24-30) Interest in personal spirituality beyond creedal and institutional expressions of religion continues to be strong (Pew Forum 2015) especially in the way concepts of mindfulness, spiritual well-being and spiritual care have come to suffuse professional practice and institutional provision (Zsolnai and Flanagan 2019).

### *iv. Resistance and Antipathy*

But perhaps the most serious finding of recent research, and one which is quite relevant to our concerns, is the conclusion that religion is viewed increasingly not as something innocuous or marginal, but, as Linda Woodhead has put it, 'a toxic brand' (2014). So the postsecular contains a mix of institutional decline and persistence of disaffiliated spirituality, along with widespread suspicion of religion. And whilst a lot of that probably only manifests itself at this instinctive distrust of organized, dogmatic faith, it is important to acknowledge the impact on public discourse of the continued popularity of a group of high-profile atheist and humanists who consistently voice objections to the very legitimacy of religion as a form of public discourse (DeLashmutt 2009; Hart 2010). Such campaigners object to any religiously-motivated intervention

in public life, such as policies around same-sex marriage, assisted dying, faith schools, and so on.

Never mind that new Atheism often conflates the increase in religious observance with a rise in religious violence; that it over-states the conflict between religion and science; it fails to see the enduring 'after-life' of religion in the popular imagination; that it overlooks the possibility of European exceptionalism and continues to propagate the superiority of the European Enlightenment. Despite these, the new Atheists' ability to articulate something of people's instinctive distrust of any form of external authority, including religion, and to place religion on the wrong side of progress, reason and human flourishing, shows that religion remains a source of discomfort and distrust for many. Yet amidst that, there is also tangible evidence for a greater complexity beyond a straightforward reversal of the secularization thesis or Peter Berger's (1999) terminology of 'desecularization': more like an extended after-life of religious decline, tempered by the mutation, diversification and reinvention of many forms of religious practice.

This 'postsecular' turn in civil society signifies a number of things, therefore. It is in part an acknowledgement of the persistence of conventional religious beliefs and practices alongside the emergence of novel forms of religious practice. But it also represents a collapse of the binaries of religion and secularity that have characterised Western modernity. As Charles Taylor has argued, '… *the interesting story is not simply one of decline, but also of a new placement of the sacred or spiritual in relation to individual*

*and social life. This new placement is now the occasion for recompositions of spiritual life in new forms, and for new ways of existing both in and out of relation to God.'* (Taylor, 2008, p. 437)

So as far as many parts of the world are concerned, this new dispensation represents much less of a religious revival and much more a quest for new footholds within a public square that is itself more fragmented and disparate, more global, more diverse. It is a context in which the contribution of religion to the well-being of communities is welcomed by some, with new agendas and increasing enthusiasm; but at the same time, the very legitimacy of faith to speak or contribute at all is contested as vigorously as ever. The question becomes, then, one of how, and on what terms, such faith-based reasoning might be communicated, and in particular whether religious communities should be expected to accommodate themselves to alternative views.

This is familiar territory for those who insist that Christians must articulate their core principles in terms that are accessible to pluralist, secular society. Perhaps, then, this will entail a renewal of the practice of Christian apologetics, '*essentially a question of how to engage with a non-Christian interlocutor in order to persuade that person of the validity of Christian faith and practice*.' (Graham, 2017, pp. 6-7) The early Christian epistle, the first letter of Peter, summarises this imperative as follows: *Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have*. (1 Peter 3.15, NIV). Is there sufficient historical precedent to imagine

that this early Christian history has something to say to the challenges of postsecularity?

## Recovering Christian Apologetics

The fact that Christianity struggles to be heard today calls for a creative and proactive engagement with our culture. It requires us to acknowledge the reasons why people find religion alien and 'toxic' and to engage seriously with that. Out of that awareness that nothing can be taken for granted, that the world at large no longer feels at ease with religion and cannot understand when the churches speak of God, then we need to search for the points of engagement and dialogue all the more diligently. How is this to be done? What would it mean to engage with culture, to undertake – or reclaim – the practice of apologetics?

Apologetics refers to the tradition of Christian discourse that has endeavoured to offer a defence of the grounds of faith to a range of interlocutors. It might be defined as 'the attempt to defend a particular belief or system of beliefs against objections' (Beilby 2011, 11). In his *History of Apologetics*, Avery Dulles identifies three strands of Christian apologetics: '*Religious apologists*' who traditionally would engage with adherents of other religious or philosophical systems and debate the intellectual coherence of the Gospel. '*Internal apologists*' were more concerned to address doctrinal error or heresy within the Christian community itself; and a third group, which Dulles terms '*Political*

*apologists*' advanced defences of Christianity to the powers-that-be, often in the face of state persecution (Dulles 1971, xx).

In the New Testament, we have some notable examples. Beginning with the day of Pentecost (Acts 2) the disciples communicated the Good news through the medium of the cultural and philosophical world-views of their audiences. Acts of the Apostles records how on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2.14–36), Peter's address to the crowd was couched in a way that placed Jesus as Messiah, prophet of Israel and fulfilment of the Hebrew Scriptures.

In the story of the apostle Paul's early missionary work, the effectiveness of his preaching the Gospel rests on the adoption of the cultures and philosophical assumptions of his listeners. Paul's journey to Thessalonica (Acts 17.1–9) included a visit to a synagogue, where he presented Jesus as the fulfilment of the Jewish Scriptures and prophets, which appeared sufficient to generate a hostile reaction from his audience. When preaching at the Areopagus in Athens (Acts 17.16–34), Paul focuses less on the Hebrew scriptures and chooses instead to engage with the pagan philosophy of the crowd. He preaches the Gospel as the fulfilment of ancient, hitherto hidden, divine wisdom. But when on trial in Caesarea (Acts 24.1–8), and having to defend himself against the orator Tertullus, he does so by appealing to the Jewish Laws and the Prophets. He is then transferred to Jerusalem (25. 1-12) where he avails himself of his rights as a Roman citizen to be heard by Caesar's court. These principles establish important precedents: of beginning from the world-view of one's dialogue partner,

with an ability to be almost 'bilingual' in terms of speaking about the Gospel but in terms accessible and comprehensible to one's audience.

### *1 Peter 3.15: Let your lives speak*

A classic text of early Christian apologetics is the first letter of Peter, in which the main warrant of the Church's credibility (and that of the Gospel) is the proclamation in deed and word of Christ crucified.

> *Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened. But in your hearts, set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. (1 Peter 3.13-17).*

This is a text forged out of the collective experience of those who perceive themselves as suffering for their faith, which by all accounts was not uncommon amongst first and second century Christian communities. Commentators are unsure as to whether this was chiefly at the hands of the State or simply everyday hostility from those around them. The legal connotations of 'apologia' suggest that the 'account' the Christians are

called to give would be in a court of law; but on the other hand, the imperative to respond to anyone and everyone who asks suggests that it may have been in response to more low-key hostility (Achtemeier 1996, 34-36).

This social and political climate called for a particular kind of resilience, which the writer argues rests in the example and inspiration of Christ himself. The community is advised to see no contradiction between whatever difficulties they experience in the present and the reward or vindication that is to come, since this mirrors the logic of Christ's suffering and death and the promise of his resurrection. This is the 'hope' that sustains them in their privation. They are encouraged to stand firm in the face of ill-treatment. In spite of their suffering, no real harm can befall the ones who live with integrity and who hold to their faith. Good deeds and upright behaviour are their warrant; and God himself will honour that.

By living distinctive and exemplary lives, refusing either to cave in to persecution or assimilate to ungodly values, Christians are identifying with Christ's redemptive suffering and pledging their hope in the ultimate victory of the Cross. And if to be a 'Christian' is considered a crime, then it is one that a Christian should uphold with pride – which might be seen as another small subversion of Imperial authority, since in a normal trial one pleads innocent to any charges; yet here, the church is instructed to confess freely to their faith in the name of Christ who also underwent trial and punishment. The praxis and witness of a community prepared to model its corporate life on the suffering of Jesus constitutes its own best apologetic.

***Post-Biblical Apologetics***

As Christianity itself expanded, so it encountered different alternative cultures; and it continued to attract attention, not all of it benign, from the Imperial authorities. So we see a continuity of the threads identified by Avery Dulles, of religious, internal and political, or public apologists: addressing 'Jews, pagans, sceptics and Emperors' (Graham 2013).

However, whilst the Biblical and Classical paradigms seemed to involve a kind of performative witness in which the exemplary lifestyle represented the primary focus of an apologetic, and where the apologist sought to find shared terms of reference from which to conduct their argument, the focus within Twentieth century and twenty-first century apologetics has tended to be on forms of propositional belief which correspond with Christian doctrine. As James Beilby, a leading modern exponent explains, '*In some cases, apologetics appropriately and naturally leads to an offer for a person to commit her life to Christ*' (Beilby 1983, 23), granting a person 'the intellectual permission to believe' (Craig 2010, 19), as preparation for what John Stackhouse calls 'crossing the line' (Stackhouse 2002, 78).

Historically, however, this flies in the face of most of the trajectory of Christian apologetics which saw dialogue with surrounding culture as a necessary engagement and not simply capitulation to secular understanding. Whereas early Christian apologetics saw theology not as primarily evidential or positivist but as something that informed a way of life and articulated a whole way of being, these modern apologists

have adopted what Myron Penner calls 'a kind of *apologetic positivism* … according to which Christian beliefs must be demonstrably rational to be accepted.' (2013, 44) In the best tradition of positivist science, truth is 'correspondence between reality and our words by means of propositions' (2013, 32). Penner continues, '*Issues such as the epistemological authority of Scripture, the intellectual coherence of theism or miracles, the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus … take center stage in modern discussions of Christian faith.*' (2013, 33)

In its pursuit of logical argument and evidentialist proofs, this strand of modern apologetics has arguably become decontextualized, disregards the rootedness of Christian belief in historic communities of practice or discourse and simply appeals to the mind of the private individual. It is rooted in the Enlightenment paradigm of the autonomous, universal self whose capacity to discern truth is precisely dependent on their independence from external impediments or obligations -- tradition, autobiography, or emotion.

Behind such a model of apologetics is a particular view of salvation as being called out of a hostile and degenerate world. This spills over into a language, conscious or unconscious, of adversarial combat. So for example, in the face of prevailing cultural challenges, Christians will need 'upgraded apologetic weaponry' (Milbank 2011, xiii); Kreeft and Tacelli talk about 'the battle of arguments' (2003, 10; 139); and William Lane Craig predicts, 'we've got to train our kids for war' (2008, 20). No wonder John Stackhouse decries this in terms of 'apologetics as martial arts' (Stackhouse 2002, ix).

Such dualism of Christ and culture also fails to see apologetics as premised on any kind of common ground – or 'bridge-building' as Alistair McGrath puts it – on which Christians and non-Christians might engage in meaningful exchange. As I've suggested, this neglect of any kind of 'cultural apologetics'—meaningful engagement with the broader community via shared reference-points and common debate -- represents a departure from the classical apologists' objective of making their message comprehensible to others. However, as John Stackhouse argues,

> *Christianity … is much more than a set of propositions to which one might or might not grant intellectual assent. It is, at its heart, a path of life, a following of Jesus Christ as disciples and as members of the worldwide Church. If apologetics consists entirely of words and truths, therefore, it will literally fail to communicate Christianity, but instead, literally distort it by shrinking it to what words and truths can portray*. (Stackhouse 2002, 131)

This is not to say that defending and commending the faith should not be carried out as an essential part of Christian witness. However, Christians today need an entirely different paradigm for their apologetics, appropriate to a postsecular age. As I have been spelling out already, our contemporary age seems to carry particular challenges, in which religion is both a clear and present reality in the world and yet proves trouble-some and alien to many people.

**Learning to 'Speak Christian'**

The writer of the first letter of Peter may advise Christians to 'give an answer to the hope that is within us'; but what if we discover that we cannot find the words to articulate it? It may not only be in society at large, but crucially, within the churches that we find a deficit of religious and theological literacy. How much confidence, how much training, is the ordinary (lay) Christian given to prepare them for that ambassadorial task? Christians owe it to themselves as much as others to foster a greater skilfulness and articulacy in public life: to earn the right to be taken seriously, and to be willing and able to justify their moral, social and political convictions in terms which speak intelligibly into the public square. In the words of Marcus Borg, we have to learn how to 'speak Christian' in order to engage effectively in Christian *apologetics* (Borg 2011).

Borg argues that Christians have lost much of their connection to the language of tradition; and similarly, mainstream culture finds it meaningless and irrelevant. This is a 'major stumbling block' to the credibility of Christianity. The original sense of words like salvation, sin, repentance and even terms like God, Jesus and Son of God has been distorted. Similarly, the language and conventions of creeds, prayers and liturgies no longer evoke a meaningful world but have become frozen in time. They represent defunct models of what it means to be church and patterns of relationship – with God and one another – that no longer ring true.

This is more than simply a problem of literalism, although the influence is felt of a positivist culture that believes Biblical texts point to empirical facts rather than being a compendium of literature dealing in law, myth, poetry as well as 'historical fact'. But Borg asks, how can Christians recover the more authentic, richer, more subtle meanings that Bible and tradition bequeath to us, if only we listen for them? How can these sources be made to speak more convincingly to today's culture? It is no surprise if people feel these things have lost their connection with their experience and no longer address their needs. The language of faith has been 'hollowed out'; yet as Borg argues, 'It is about learning to read and hear the language of faith again.' (Borg 2011, 3) We need to become (in my words) 'theologically literate' if we are truly to reconnect with tradition and with other people. (That may be another way of thinking about the public witness that is Christian apologetics: of making the theological connection between inherited tradition, including Scripture  and contemporary experience.)

But of course I have also been saying that it's not simply about words or rational arguments or abstract proofs. It is apologetics in word and deed. Indeed, Borg argues that (re)learning to 'speak Christian' is an essential part of that. As a scholar of the New Testament and early Christianity, his concern is to retrieve words from their later misappropriation and restore them to original usage – or at least rescue them from their attenuated, impoverished state. But of course what matters is how these words, this language, facilitates faith for us today. But I don't think Borg would dissent from my view which is that it's not just about being word-perfect. So as Borg says, language is the medium through which we participate in a culture – certainly in a religious world

– and that's not about being word-perfect but about entering into the imaginative vista of a lived tradition – to be able to inhabit it effectively and creatively.

Borg is concerned that the distortion of Christian speech has forced us towards a world-view of a punitive Gospel in which God's love is reserved for those who believe the right things, and that salvation is to be found beyond this world. Yet the Biblical witness and the wisdom of tradition, he argues, speaks of a God who loves unconditionally and whose passion is for the transformation of this world, and the whole of creation (Borg 2011, 231-235). So Borg's task of recontextualising Christian language is about reminding us of the meanings that are possible. But these words – that theology, talk about God – only exist to do a job of work: to orientate us within the world of faith, give us a means to pursue a life of faith and to begin to communicate that to others.

But do we really *need* to learn to 'speak Christian'? If the language of faith is so off-putting, are we better off translating everything into a general language? The answer is, I think, that we still need the nurture and foundations in the language, traditions and practices of faith. Perhaps, like English Heritage, we *do* need to 'be present in the past': rooted in, but not held captive by, the wisdom of tradition. Plus, as Borg notes, to abandon the language of faith just because it feels anachronistic is to leave it to those who misappropriate it and render it so one-dimensional.

So 'speaking Christian' into the public square may require some mediation and translation between the historical tradition and contemporary culture – but of course,

that's what Christian apologists have been doing since Paul of Tarsus onwards! However, that kind of translation or bilingualism – of bridging one culture to another – is not the same as Esperanto, of an invented common language. In Christian terms, Jesus is still the source of our 'language' about what is good, true and meaningful (Borg 2011, 238) – but the task of apologetics is to find the common ground where true conversations can take place. I want to reclaim an understanding of apologetics, therefore, as not so much a matter of rational argument, so much as being able to explain and witness to the wider canvass of an entire lifestyle and to narrate and make transparent and accessible an entire world-view.

Such a witness to faith-in-action must step beyond the parameters of its own tradition and engage in conversations with non-Christian (religious and secular) world-views in order to demonstrate how and why Christian sources and norms are capable of shaping viable responses to the common challenges facing us all in global civil society today. The apologist must test their claims against competing and complementary frameworks; but having done so, they complete their task by contributing to the shaping not just of lives of believers but the common welfare of all humanity. So the purpose of such apologetic conversation is not to impose a particular set of dogmas or orthodoxies but to nurture constructive alliances around shared moral tasks, and invite deeper exploration of the convictions that nurture such praxis. It models an apologetics of presence and partnership that refuses to 'bracket out' questions of faith and belief, on the basis that civil society is strengthened, and not compromised, by the virtues and practices of religion.

Van Putten, Overeem and van Steden's study of the Street Pastors movement serves as one illustration of how religious practices can be mediated into a pluralistic and postsecular public square (van Putten *et al.* 2019). As a ministry of presence within the urban night-time economy, Street Pastors adopt a non-partisan and broad-based approach; but there is no denying that their motivation is authentically grounded in religious conviction.

> *The immediate implication of this faith-based engagement is that Street Pastors do their work explicitly as Christians: their faith is the key driver behind their desire to help vulnerable youngsters [in] the night-life economy. They do so not by handing out Bibles, but simply by acting as Good Samaritans who care about people in their local communities.* (van Putten *et al.* 2019, 21)

Further examples of such apologetic public theology can be seen at work in the pragmatic collaborations between diverse stake-holders in local civil society, embracing the '*interconnections between religious, humanist and secularist positionalities in the dynamic geographies of the city*' (Cloke and Beaumont 2012, 32). The practical side of this is to be found in projects like food banks, youth training, mental health projects and work with migrants; yet there is a strong commitment to the kind of deep conversations about the underlying values – religious and non-religious – that motivate such collaborations (Baker and Miles-Watson 2012; Pennington 2020).

All these examples affirm the notion that truth is achieved through dialogue and mutual comprehension. Christian witness must pass the test of public accountability. The religious faith underpinning moral and social conviction is more like an invitation to undertake a journey rather than a set of propositions to which we must assent. For these writers, that kind of apologetics emerges from the lived experience of a community whose faith is attested to by the quality of its life together. Its witness to that faith, nurtured by that common life, will rest in the social goods it promotes (Graham 2017, 13).

So the exhortation to 'give an account of oneself' finds expression in in terms of articulating the motivations behind the practices of social activism and neighbourliness. There is still a task to be done for Christian apologetics to '*show that it can form, inform and sustain the moral and spiritual architecture of a civil society so that truth, justice and mercy are more nearly approximated in the souls of persons and in the institutions of the common life.*' (Stackhouse 2007, 107) Theologically, this actually roots Christian apologetics in mission; and specifically, it takes its cue from contemporary theologies of the *missio Dei*, which understands mission as less a matter of personal salvation or institutional church growth, so much as a participation with the triune God in the task of redeeming the whole of creation as a work of reconciliation (Bosch 2011).

We might frame this as a triple response. It comprises first an act of *discernment* and theological reflection, in terms of trying to attend to what God is doing in the world,

and where. It stresses God's prior initiative and action in effecting the work of reconcil-ation and redemption, and practical discernment of those signs as a kind of 'double listening' to tradition and context. This is the prelude to the next stage, which is the task of *participation* in that mission: a vocation of *discipleship and activism*. This is why, I think, the practical demonstration of love in action is such a fundamental grounding of the practice of apologetics. But finally, the third task is to match those deeds with words: in terms of *bearing witness to God* at work, in ways both prior to and beyond the conventionally ecclesial or religious. So this three-fold work of discernment – of the signs of the times, of a calling to respond, and to announce and commend the work of God, is always a *public theology* – an apologetics which bears witness to God-in-the-world, *to* the world (Graham 2013; 2017). And I've been suggesting that the convergent language of the common good, of a shared concern for the repair of the world (in the name of the *missio Dei*) represents the territory in which the best apologetics of presence can be practised.

**Conclusion**

This new apologetics for a postsecular age entails cultivating a reflexive, self-aware understanding of what it means to be a person of faith in a world in which that is deeply counter-cultural (and often suspect); and of being prepared to 'give an account of the hope we have' (1 Peter 3.15). But this rests, as I have been arguing, on a willingness to enter more deeply into the sources and norms of one's own tradition, in

the belief that dialogue with the other necessarily brings deeper self-understanding as well. The 'hope that is within us' looks forward in anticipation to the possibilities of a greater wisdom and more expansive vision born out of the dialogue; and apologetics must necessarily be rooted in these process of dialogue and engagement.

The contrast between a form of apologetics focused on right belief and what I'm terming a new or postsecular apologetics, premised on a demonstration of faith in action – one that points in word and deed to the mission of God -- can perhaps best be illustrated by the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). A rich young man approaches Jesus for guidance. His primary concern appears to be that of his own salvation: 'What must I do to inherit eternal life? What must I do to be saved?' he asks. Jesus' response, however, suggests that the divine priority is, rather different. It is one of right relation: with ourselves, others and with God. In response to the rich man's question, Jesus tells a story of an outsider, the religious other, as the one in whom we see God's spirit at work in the world. It is in such acts of compassion that we are invited to imagine what it might mean if Christian mission and ministry were exercised primarily through the virtues of empathy and solidarity. What matters most is not my personal salvation, not even the fortunes of the institutional Church -- but something altogether more practical and immediate – yet no less sacred: the fact of our common humanity, made in the image of God. The real question, then – at the heart of apologetics, of good citizenship, and the very message of Jesus -- is this: '*Who is my neighbour?*'

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