

AUGUSTINE'S STRATEGY AS AN APOLOGIST

In 1777, in the midst of a new dispute over the historical criticism of the gospels, Lessing wrote a famous little paper in which he made the point that historical assertions about miracles and fulfilled prophecies may not be as valuable as apologists for Christianity had often supposed. The difficulty, he said, is that historical reports cannot be a proof of the metaphysical and moral claims made by Christianity; that would be to jump from one set of meanings to another.

But Lessing seems to hold out another possibility. The motto of this little writing is a passage from the beginning of Origen's reply to Celsus, where Origen asserts that

the gospel has a proof which is peculiar to itself, and which is more divine than a Greek proof based on dialectical argument. This more divine demonstration the apostle calls a "demonstration of the Spirit and of power."

By Spirit Origen means not charismatic gifts but prophecies fulfilled in Christ; by power he means miracles. What interests Lessing is that Origen finishes by saying,

traces of them [miracles] still remain among those who live according to the will of the Logos.¹

The demonstration of the Spirit and of power, Lessing suggests, occurs whenever one actually *experiences* a miracle or the fulfillment of a prophecy;

even this, however, does not help him greatly, since he lives in the eighteenth century, and no longer experiences such things. But he still has one thing left—the teachings themselves, the recognition that has been given to them, their fruits in human life.²

Without taking Lessing as an authority or attempting to say exactly what he meant, I wish to pick up the theme which he brought out. For it is an important strand not only in modern justifications of the Christian faith, which characteristically try to avoid pure argumentation and come as close as possible to direct experience and insight,³ but also in patristic apologetics. Although the writers of that age could engage in all the familiar kinds of argumentation—the nature of human knowledge, the existence of God, the destiny of man, the need of revelation and salvation—they could never stray far from their immediate situation of encounter with government, pagan religion, and the philosophers, where the Christian movement had to make good its claims through comparison or combat with its surroundings.

Take Origen, since Lessing seems to have learned something from him. He exploits the fact that the apostles were simple men, deficient in learning, for this shows that they relied not on the wisdom of men but on the power of God. He often takes note of the way they lived and risked death and endured suffering, as proof of their conviction of the truth of what they were proclaiming; and he contrasts them with the philosophers, who teach many of the same truths about God and the soul

but are able neither to live as though the things they say are true, nor to bring others to live in this way.⁴

Origen is not glorifying mere fanaticism or blind faith. He is able to bring some clear criteria to bear—the philosophical one that thousands have abandoned the merely customary religion of their own cultures to follow, despite all the dangers, a truly rational and spiritual faith; the moral one that there has been a dramatic conversion or rectification of life; and the religious one that all of these things are worthy of God, showing his love toward the human race by communicating with them in a way they can understand and helping them for their own benefit.⁵

It is the same with Augustine. Although he wrote on the whole range of apologetic themes,⁶ his apologetics usually comes to a focus in an encounter of life with life, evaluated in the light of moral and religious criteria which can be made clear to all. The proof of Christianity is in the moving of the Spirit. But the gifts of the Spirit are authenticated only if they conform to the moral norms which issue from the eternal Word; and the test, quite simply, is the love of God and of one's neighbor in God.⁷

But on the way to and from that focal point (and it is a point upon which he touches repeatedly) Augustine has much else to say, and it must be attended to if we are to understand even this criterion of love properly. I propose to follow him through three periods, noting how his concerns—

and his apologetic methods—shift in important ways. If I may be somewhat schematic, early in his career his manner is what was called in that era “protreptic” or hortatory, a friendly kind of discourse urging one’s readers to follow out their own best insights, almost what we call today “dialogue”; and he addresses himself especially to those who had some philosophical training or sympathies. In mid-career his style shifts to what was called “eristic” or controversial; his attack was on the religious front, against the pagans and their philosophical admirers. And at the last he finds, in *The City of God*, that he must write an *apologia* in the strictest sense, a defense and justification of the Christian community; and it had to be addressed, as in the days of the first apologists, to those who considered themselves the champions of the Roman system of government. As Augustine moves through these stages the changes come not through subtracting anything essential but rather through adding new complications, so that he ends with a chastened apologetic strategy which, I shall suggest, still deserves our attention today.

I. Exhortation to the Philosophers

The early Church did not feel compelled to devote a major effort, in the fashion of most Christian apologetics since Thomas Aquinas, to arguments about the range of human knowledge, the existence of God, and the destiny of the soul. To be sure, the philosophical schools had their disagreements, and Christian writers shared in the debate; Au-