

“Something Divine Mingled Among Them”: Countercultural Holiness as Apologetic in the Second Century

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The End of Apologetics.

A few years ago, that was the title of the text that won the *Christianity Today* Book of the Year Award in the category Apologetics and Evangelism. When I read this work from philosopher and pastor Myron Bradley Penner, I was relieved to learn it is not the entirety of apologetics that’s on its way to the cemetery. It is only—in Penner’s words—“the Enlightenment project of attempting to establish a rational foundation for Christian belief” that’s drawing its final breaths.¹ And yet, this dying approach to apologetics is not limited to one stream of apologetics.

If Penner is correct, this Enlightenment project is not the exclusive domain of any particular type of apologetics. Every modern expression of apologetics—presuppositionalism no less than classical apologetics, evidentialism no less than Reformed epistemology—is guilty of trying to launch arguments from objective, universal, and neutral common ground.² Each approach assumes in differing ways the modern myth of “a common space free and disengaged from either the political or religious sphere.”³

¹ Myron Bradley Penner, *The End of Apologetics: Christian Witness in a Postmodern Context* (Baker Academic, 2013) 7.

² Penner, 34–36.

³ Penner, 27.

According to *The End of Apologetics: Christian Witness in a Postmodern Context*, no common ground remains where Christian and non-Christian persons may meet. To seek such common place is to grant that space to secularity. Any apologetic that attempts to mount an argument from a shared rational foundation may be, in Penner's words, "the single biggest threat to genuine Christian faith that we face today."⁴

What I wish to challenge in this context is not Penner's critique of current approaches to apologetics. My goal is, instead, to challenge the post-epistemological solution that *The End of Apologetics* presents as the only effective form of witness in a secular age. The intent of this paper is not merely to challenge the solution but to suggest a better alternative grounded in the apologetics of second-century Christians.

According to *The End of Apologetics*, the aim of apologetics today should be for the church to interpret society "back to itself *theologically* in such a way that both the difference between *the way of the world* and *the Christian way of the cross* is made clear."⁵ The result would be a uniquely postmodern witness in which content becomes indistinguishable from form.⁶ A Christian who witnesses in this way declares to the world, in Penner's words, "This is the truth I have encountered that has edified me. Take a look at my life, who I am and see if you think that it's true. And I believe that if you consider your own life and appropriate this truth, you will find it edifying for you too."⁷

⁴ Penner, 12; see also 183.

⁵ Penner, 104.

⁶ Penner, 90.

⁷ Penner, 103–104, 127–128, 139.

Any argument that contends for the rationality of a particular truth claim is off-limits, according to Penner, because it separates an individual's cognitive commitments from the larger context of his or her life.⁸ Christians cannot correct this crisis simply by using rational arguments within the larger context of relationships with unbelievers. The arguments themselves *are* the problem.⁹ Arguments from the order of the cosmos and appeals to Scripture remove apologetics from the context of communal witness and reduce human beings to their status of belief or unbelief. What must replace such arguments, according to *The End of Apologetics*, is a communal life of wholeness and integrity that edifies the seeker.

The End of Apologetics is correct to point out that the presumption of neutral common ground is a delusion, though presuppositional apologists have already made this point for decades. The author also rightly recognizes that apologetics ought to be expressed in a community whose life together reveals the weaknesses in the way of the world—and this is perhaps the book's strongest point. In the modern era, the defense of the faith has frequently been an intellectual and individual affair, separated from the life of the local church and focused instead on high-profile debates and superstar apologists with massive platforms, podcasts, and radio programs. Penner is correct to suggest that

Christian witness ... requires a community—a church in particular—in which truthful speech is made evident by the quality and character of their practices and life together. ...

⁸ Penner, 150, 161.

⁹ Presuppositional apologists have raised similar critiques for decades regarding the function of rational arguments in classical and evidential apologetics, albeit with different solutions. It is perplexing that little engagement with presuppositionalism or with other alternate solutions appears in *The End of Apologetics*. See Nate Claiborne, "The End of Apologetics" (August 15, 2014): www.thegospelcoalition.org.

The ability to witness requires a community of like-minded people whose way of life together displays the truth being witnessed to and makes sense of the witnesses' speech. It takes a community to tell the truth.¹⁰

Yet Penner's singleminded focus on the apologetic of an edifying community seems to sideline all appeals to the cosmos, to rationality, and to the historicity of Scripture—each one of which has, at different times and in a vast variety of different ways, served a central role in the practice of Christian apologetic long before modernity was ever a gleam in any historian's eye. *The End of Apologetics* brushes past premodern solutions by dismissing such solutions as attempts to reconstruct “the order of the premodern world.”¹¹ *However, the impossibility of reconstructing a premodern order does not negate the possibility that some patterns from the premodern church's witness in hostile cultural contexts might provide insight into contemporary practices of apologetics.* In fact, one possible apologetics model in which the Christian community is central might be found in the second century.

For several Christian apologists in the second century—Aristides, for example, as well as Justin, Athenagoras, and the author of the *Epistle to Diognetus*—the life and witness of the Christian community functioned as an essential part of their pleas for tolerance and of their arguments for the truthfulness of Christian faith. At the same time, the emphasis that these apologists placed on the witness of the community did not exclude arguments that began with rational inferences from common apprehensions of beauty, order, and contingency in the cosmos.

¹⁰ Penner, 165

¹¹ Penner, 172; see also 13 footnote 30.

In Penner's approach, the better life of the Christian community reveals to the non-Christian individual that his or her way of life is not edifying. For the apologists of the second century, the better life of the Christian community did far more than merely unmasking defective ways of being in the world. The life of the church also fulfilled and fit with the order of the cosmos itself. Far from setting aside appeals to the cosmos or arguments for the truthfulness of the text of Scripture, these apologists saw the life of the church as a fulfillment of the order of the cosmos and as a sign pointing to the self-authenticating truth of Scripture.

What I will argue in the remainder of this paper is that, in the *Apology* of Aristides in particular, the holiness of the church functioned apologetically as a crucial link between truths that were inferred from the cosmos and the truth that is revealed in Scripture. The apologetic of Aristides began with the order of the cosmos, moved to the nature of God and the holiness of the church, and then turned to the truth of the written Scriptures as the only means by which the countercultural life of the church could be understood.

The Text and Recipients of the *Apology* of Aristides

The original *Apology* of Aristides seems to have been written in the early or mid-second century. The textual history of the *Apology* is complex, and the form of the earliest Greek text cannot be established with certainty prior to the fourth century.¹² For this reason, none of the arguments in this paper depend on the precise wording in any particular text or translation of the *Apology*.

¹² Markus Vinzent, *Writing the History of Early Christianity: From Reception to Retrospection* (Cambridge University Press, 2019) 206. For textual sources, see also William Rutherford, "Reinscribing the Jews: The Story of Aristides' *Apology* 2.2–4 and 14.1b–15.2," *Harvard Theological Review* 106 (2013): 66, and, William Simpson, "Aristides' *Apology* and the Novel *Barlaam and Ioasaph*" (Ph.D. diss., King's College London, 2015) 238–239.

In the Syriac translation of the text, the stated recipient is Emperor Antoninus Pius, whereas the portion that survives in far shorter Armenian version has Emperor Hadrian as the addressee. Eusebius of Caesarea likewise places the *Apology* in the reign of Hadrian. The Greek text survives primarily as an addition in a religious romance known as *Barlaam and Ioasaph*, and this adaptation does not preserve any recipient's name.

The identity of the stated recipient is not directly relevant for the purposes of this paper. It does, however, raise the question of the intended audience of this and other early apologies, which is relevant for this discussion. It seems unlikely that the apologies of Aristides, Justin, and Athenagoras were actually presented before any of the emperors whose names they include as addressees.¹³ What may be significant, though, is the philosophical bent of each emperor addressed by these early apologists. Each one of the imperial addressees of these treatises was known to some degree as a philosopher. It seems that these names may have been intended less as destinations for the apologies and more as appeals intended to attract the attention of philosophically-inclined readers.¹⁴

“Moved by the Power of Another”: The God that the Cosmos Requires

Aristides of Athens begins his *Apology* by appealing first to the beauty of creation before moving to an argument from motion

¹³ Loveday Alexander, “The Acts of the Apostles as an Apologetic Text,” *Apologetics in the Roman Empire: Pagans, Jews, and Christians*, ed. Mark Edwards (Oxford University Press, 1999) 19; Tessa Rajak, “Talking at Trypho: Christian Apologetics as Anti-Judaism in Justin’s Dialogue with Trypho the Jew,” *Apologetics in the Roman Empire*, 25.

¹⁴ For further examination of Christians as and among philosophers, see Heidi Wendt, “Christians as and among Writer-Intellectuals in Second-Century Rome,” *Christian Teachers in Second-Century Rome*, ed. Gregory Snyder (Brill, 2020) 84–108.

that seems to echo a portion of book 12 in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*:¹⁵

When I had considered the sky and the earth and the seas and had surveyed the sun and the rest of creation, I marveled at the beauty. I perceived the world and all that is therein are moved by the power of another: God who is hidden in them and veiled by them. (*Apology* 1)

Although Aristides does appeal to a line of reasoning that later apologists might classify under the heading of classical arguments, his usage of these arguments seems intended more to raise a question than to provide an answer. His goal is not to demonstrate the existence of a generic deity but to define what attributes would need to characterize the deity that the beauty and order of the cosmos requires. According to Aristides, the cosmos calls for a deity who is “immortal, perfect, incomprehensible,” and self-existent: “He stands in need of nothing”—Aristides declares—“but all things stand in need of him” (*Apology* 1).

This declaration of the necessary nature of God brings Aristides to the undergirding questions on which he structures the bulk of his argument: *Which of the four types of people in the world—barbarians, Greeks, Jews, or Christians—is devoted to a deity that meets these requirements, and what manner of life does the worship of each genus of people produce?*

To answer these questions, Aristides first recounts the *identities* of each of the four people groups: barbarians, Greeks, Jews, and Christians. He then shows how the objects of each group's

¹⁵ Aristotle, “Ἀριστοτέλους τῶν Μετά τὰ Φυσικά Λ,” *Metaphysics, Volume II: Books 10-14. Oeconomica. Magna Moralia*, Loeb Classical Library 287, trans. Hugh Tredennick and G. Cyril Armstrong (Harvard University Press, 1935) 12:6–9 (1071b). See Thomas Gaston, “The Influence of Platonism on the Early Apologists,” *The Heythrop Journal* (2009): 577.

worship shape their *ethics*. The tetrad of human races or genuses (γέννη) in this taxonomy reveals a porousness between categories that, today, would be separately classified in terms of “religion” and “ethnicity.”¹⁶ Aristides provides an origin story for each genus, but these origin stories are as much religious as they are historical or genealogical. According to Aristides, the barbarians trace their origins to Kronos, the Greeks to Zeus, Jews to Abraham, and Christians to Jesus who was born—Aristides is careful to point out—from the Hebrew people (*Apology 2*).

As he considers the barbarians and the Greeks, Aristides highlights how each one’s theology and liturgy falls short of the deity revealed through the order and beauty of the cosmos. For Aristides, defective theologies and liturgies produce defective ethics, because human beings inevitably imitate what they adore.¹⁷ When he turns to the Jews, Aristides admits that they confess “one God, Creator of all” and that this right confession results in some right actions (*Apology 14*). Nevertheless, in their keeping of the Mosaic law, the Jewish people are not—according to Aristides—serving God; instead, they are serving angels.

“Beyond All the Nations of the Earth”: Countercultural Holiness as Evidence of Devotion to the True God

¹⁶ In *A Former Jew: Paul and the Dialectics of Race* (T&T Clark, 2019), Love Sechrest has documented the dominant functions of two key terms that indicate group identity, revealing the overlapping functions of these terms in the early centuries of Christianity: ἔθνος and γένος. ἔθνος frequently set one group in contrast to another in the context of war, religion, or land, with an emphasis on social or territorial boundaries; as an indicator of social boundaries, ἔθνος could include religion. Γένος, the Greek term sometimes translated “race,” seems to have emphasized characteristics of kind or kinship; γένος could also include religion.

¹⁷ See also “Προς Διογνητον,” *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations* 3rd ed., ed. and trans. Michael Holmes (Baker Academic, 2007) 10:4: “Αγαπησας δε μιμητής εση αυτου της χρηστοτητος.”

In the end, Aristides concludes that “Christians ... have come closer to the truth and genuine knowledge than the rest” (*Apology* 15). When Aristides begins to recount the impact of Christian theology on Christian ethics, what he describes in detail is the countercultural nature of the Christian way of life. The behavior of Christians is, Aristides declares, “beyond all the nations of the earth” (*Apology* 15, Greek). He begins his summary of the Christian way of life with clauses that echo the Septuagint text of the Torah: “They do not adulterate or fornicate,” “they do not covet what is not theirs,” “they honor father and mother,” “they love their neighbors,” “they judge with justice,” and so on.

Despite the Jewish origins of these declarations, some of them might have caused at least a few philosophically-minded Romans to nod their heads in agreement.¹⁸ Adulterous relationships were widely condemned, after all, and the first-century Stoic Musonius even took a negative view of all sexual relations outside of marriage.¹⁹ At the same time, some of these ethics would have caused a pause for these Romans. According to Aristides, for example, Christians refused to “eat the meats of idols,” in a context where it was generally agreed that “even if rationality led to skepticism about the nature of traditional gods, the ancient customs [regarding the worship of these gods] should be maintained.”²⁰

¹⁸ Justin Martyr similarly begins with patterns of life that might have been acceptable among philosophically-minded Romans before moving to patterns that would have been rejected or ridiculed. See *Apologia A*, 14–15 in *Iustini Martyris Apologiae pro Christianis. Iustini Martyris Dialogus cum Tryphone*, ed. Miroslav Marcovich (Walter de Gruyter, 2005).

¹⁹ Epictetus, *Discourses: Books 1–2*, trans. W.A. Oldfather (Harvard University Press, 1925) 2:4, 8, 13; Caius Musonius Rufus, *C. Musonii Rufi*, ed. Otto Hense (Teubner, 1905) 64, 67, 71.

²⁰ “*Religio* meant the binding ties of duty to the gods, the state, and the family, expressed in the virtue of *pietas*. It was therefore the cement of society and the foundation of justice,” Frances Young, “Greek Apologists of the Second Century,” *Apologetics in the Roman Empire*, 100.

As Aristides continues, the countercultural nature of the ethics formed in people's lives by the deity described in his opening sentences becomes increasingly clear. This is indeed a way of life that sets Christians apart in a devoted life "beyond all the nations of the earth." Christians "walk in humility and kindness" (*Apology* 15). "As for their slaves and their children if they have any, they persuade them to become Christians because of the love they have for them. When they become Christians, they call them 'brothers' without distinction." "They rescue orphans from the ones who abuse them, and they give without grudging to the one who has nothing." "If any of their number is imprisoned or oppressed for the name 'Christ,' all of them provide for his needs, and if it is possible for him to be delivered, they deliver him" (*Apology* 15). These are the patterns of life that the second-century satirical writer Lucian of Samosata ridiculed in *Passing of Peregrinus* (12–13, 16).²¹ When the Cynic philosopher Peregrinus played the part of a Christian and ended up in prison, Christians provided his needs and worked to have him released, according to Lucian. Lucian mercilessly mocked the generosity of Christians for those who had been imprisoned.

The church does function as an apologetic for Aristides. Yet his ecclesial apologetic does not prevent him from beginning his apologetic with a rational argument from nature. In one sense, the moral habits of the church provide another type of common ground in the *Apology* of Aristides. This ecclesial common ground is not "common" in the sense that Christians and non-Christians both practice these ethics or even in the sense that both aspire to practice these ethics. The Christian way of life provides a common point of understanding in the sense that this life was so well

²¹ Notice in particular the sarcastic tone in chapters 11 and 12 of "The Passing of Peregrinus," in Lucian, *The Passing of Peregrinus. The Runaways. Toxaris or Friendship. The Dance. Lexiphanes. The Eunuch. Astrology. The Mistaken Critic. The Parliament of the Gods. The Tyrannicide. Disowned*, Loeb Classical Library 302, trans. A. M. Harmon (Harvard University Press, 1936).

known that non-Christians could not deny that this was how Christians lived.

According to Aristides, the order and beauty of the cosmos declare a deity with particular attributes, and neither the barbarians, nor the Greeks, nor the Jewish people are devoted to such a deity. Since the deity that one serves shapes the life that one lives, the defective liturgies of the barbarians and the Greeks result in depraved lives. The Jews confess the self-existent deity required by the cosmos and thus do some good, but their goodness is only partial because their service is not to God but to the angels who mediated the Mosaic law. Christians, however, practice a holy way of life “beyond all the nations of the earth” that has never been seen before. The theology and liturgy of the Christians produces this never-before-seen way of life because Christians are devoted to the true God, the very deity to which the cosmos testifies.

“Take Now Their Writings”:

The Turn from Community to Text

If the argument of the *Apology* of Aristides stopped here with the holiness of the church, perhaps it might partially fit the pattern described in *The End of Apologetics*. Despite beginning with an argument from the cosmos, maybe this would still produce an apologetic that simply declares to the world, “This is the truth I have encountered that has edified me. Take a look at my life, at who I am and see if you think that it’s true.”

Yet it is precisely at this point that Aristides makes a crucial turn and declares these words to his reader:

The sayings and ordinances [of the Christians] ... and the glory of their service and the expectation of their recompense of reward, you can know from their writings. ... So take now their writings and read them. You will find that it is not of

myself that I have brought these things forward nor have I spoken these things as their advocate, but as I have read them in their writings, I firmly believe these things as well as the things that are to come. (*Apology* 16)

For Aristides, the holiness of the Christian community is not the final word. This countercultural way of being in the world is a sign that becomes explicable only through the written Word. These words were what assured Aristides of the truth of the Christian faith, and it is only through these words that the life of the church became intelligible to him.

What the *Apology* of Aristides describes is not only a clash of lifestyles but also a clash of narratives. Aristides and other second-century apologists consistently presented the writings revered by Christians as “truer, more authoritative, and more ancient than the revered literature of antiquity on which the culture around them based its whole system of education.”²² To become a Christian in the second century was not merely to trade one network of relationships for another; it was to trade every previous narrative for the metanarrative of Scripture.

It is in this context that Aristides declares in the Syriac text, “Truly, this people is a new people, and there is something divine mingled among them” (*Apology* 16). The Greek has a different sentence at this point: “For the utterances [ρηματα] they speak are not from humanity but they are from God” (*Apology* 16 Greek). What is mingled among this people that sets them apart are the very words of God; as a result, the words that they utter derive not from themselves but from God.

From Cosmos to Community to Scripture

²² Frances Young, “Greek Apologists of the Second Century,” *Apologetics in the Roman Empire*, 92.

The End of Apologetics has called for an end to rational arguments from the cosmos and for a turn to the edifying life of a community instead. The *Apology* of Aristides does provide an apologetic that's centered on the life of the church, but the centrality of community in this apologetic never excludes the possibility of appeals to the cosmos and to Scripture. For Aristides, devotion to the Triune God revealed in Jesus Christ produces a life of countercultural holiness that stands in contrast to every other way of being in the world. This apologetic begins with the cosmos and then turns to the Scriptures, where the lives of believers are re-narrated within the greatest story of all. In some sense, the content of general revelation falsifies the narratives of those outside the Christian community, and the holiness of the community points the seeker's attention to the words of Scripture, which form the narrative that sustains and makes sense of this way of life.

Here is an analogy that is imperfect—as all analogies necessarily are—but perhaps helpful nonetheless: *In one sense, the beauty and order of the cosmos are like a map that leads you to one and only one open door. Every human being possesses this map, but apart from the life-giving work of God, everyone tries every map except the one that leads to the right door. When you look through the right door and see the people on the inside, the community's way of life may be what you notice first, but you quickly recognize that the community inhabits a space with a particular shape. Their way of life is inseparable from the shape of this space. Those dimensions by which the life of the church is shaped are the Scriptures.*

I do not pretend that Aristides' context was identical to our own. The counter-narrative of secularity has set people today within an immanent frame that no one in the second century could have imagined. And yet, now no less than then, the holiness of the

Christian community is able to highlight the inadequacy of prevailing cultural narratives—whether those are the narratives of Kronos and Zeus or of the immanent frame—and, through a life that coheres with the God that the cosmos requires, the life of the community can direct the seeker’s attention to the only text that can make sense of the sacrificial life of this community. When that happens, what the church provides is not merely an example of the sort of life that a non-believer might find edifying and meaningful; the church exemplifies a way of life that is inexplicable apart from a power greater than anything this world can produce.