

March 10th, 2008. Presentation by Anthony Horvath to the Philosophy Club at Concordia University Wisconsin. Copyright 2008, All Rights Reserved.

It is an honor and a pleasure to be here today. I have been asked to speak on apologetics through the arts, such as literature and music or in other words the promotion of Christianity through the fruits of the creative mind. In order to understand where I'm coming from it will be helpful to give a little bit of background.

I grew up going to a Lutheran grade school and high school and went to college- this college, in fact- with the intent to become a pastor. I enrolled in the pastoral ministry program and promptly became an atheist. Normally they want your pastors to believe in God so this was a real problem. A short time into my second semester I was a Christian again but under new terms. I really understood what I believed and why I believed it. I also realized that I didn't want to be a pastor anymore but rather someone who would help people who had been in a situation like my own. I stayed in the pastoral ministry program because I was enjoyed theology and such, which probably wasn't the best career move. It did allow me to finally get some teaching positions. I taught a year of 9th and 10th grade religion in Minnesota and then 7th, 8th, 9th, 10th, and 12th grade religion in Rockford Illinois, where I also taught Biblical Greek and philosophy and Christian apologetics at a local Lutheran bible college.

I then moved to Wisconsin where I was the Director for Parish Ministries- sort of a glorified DCE position- for three years. In the meantime, in the midst of my professional church work career, I was engaging in debate with atheists, mormons, and the occasional jehovah witness on various online forums. I am now a stay at home dad, an author, a speaker, and still an apologist, but now apologetics is not what I do in my spare time but is my main endeavor.

Now, the interesting thing is that over the last 5 to 6 years my perspective on apologetics has changed. I already had a deep disappointment that the church and my Christian education had failed to equip me with even the basics of the evidences for Christianity but my focus was firmly on the nonChristian, usually the one positively hostile to Christianity. But I started to notice that most of the nonChristians I was interacting with had also grown up in the church. In many cases, their knowledge of Christianity was as bad as mine had been and in many cases much worse.

I realized that the church itself was generating nonbelievers by setting people up for disappointment and disillusionment. Aren't we all aware of Christians who believe that it is 'all about faith' and if you have questions or express doubt of any kind that is akin to the unforgivable sin? This attitude was one part of the problem. Another part of the problem was institutional. We are still in most places transmitting the faith the same way today as it was transmitted fifty and a hundred years ago if not longer. In past generations, however, the Christian church was essentially the only game in town. There wasn't much need to be concerned that much was being left unsaid because inertia was behind the Christian church.

That is clearly not the case anymore. Today, the competition in the marketplace of ideas is fierce and there are many contenders. In fact, there are so many contenders that relativism of various sorts is flourishing. With so many different claims to truth out there surely it means that none of us could possibly assert that any one of them might actually be true. What is true for you might not be true for me. Another response has been to approach truth claims like a smorgasboard, or a buffet, picking and choosing the things that seem right to you and with an eye to the only absolute virtue remaining-

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tolerance- allowing others to do the same.

Sources for information have diversified as well. No longer does the inquisitive 13 year old consider his pastor or youth worker to be the first and most obvious place to learn about God. Today, the Internet holds that distinction. On the Internet, of course, any and all voices are heard and can be found quickly and easily. How well can a 13 year old evaluate truth claims, you wonder? How well does anybody in the climate we're in today?

One solution would be to call for the destruction of all computers and the Internet, beginning with the Christian church, I suppose, but that doesn't seem very realistic to me. Even if it was doable, I'm not even sure we'd want to. As a solution I think it would have limited effect and value and would probably make matters worse. The best solution seems to me to get out and compete and show that Christianity is up to the challenge.

Now, that brings us closer to the topic at hand but I still need to share more about how my perspective has changed over the last half decade. On the one hand, I have discovered that many people who fall away from the Christian faith fall away for all the wrong reasons- and I think I myself belonged in that category- and on the other hand I think the church itself bears some of the blame for that by being slow to realize that the situation had changed and adapted accordingly.

To add to this, I have also observed how by and large people simply are not equipped to be persuaded by evidence and argument in the first place. At least, they are not built as it seems that they were in the past. This is not a new reality. Dorothy Sayers and CS Lewis are two Christian luminaries who complained about this fact. Both complained about how there was a time when one came to the view that certain propositions were correct representations of reality and changed their lives to conform to their beliefs while in their time, and in our own day, it was nothing to have people who believed any number of things- mutually contradictory ones even- and not care at all.

Sayers found herself representing Christianity only to be accused of invoking her own novel interpretations about what Christianity was about. Even the atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell wrote that robust definitions of Christianity were a thing of the past so that before he could give his explanation for why he wasn't a Christian he needed to offer a definition first. Incidentally, ironically Russell didn't make use of the robust definition but rather his own view on the essentials of the Christian religion.

It would be an interesting discussion on its own to talk about why some of us, myself included, actually are persuaded by evidence and argument and that conversation is one worth having at some point. For now, though, it is better to stay on the relevant observation that by and large for as much as people talk about wanting to know what truth is when it gets down to it they feel their way along and do a fair bit of picking and choosing. What does seem to move people is story.

Now, this isn't a very controversial observation. The controversy might begin when we begin asking ourselves how we are going to adapt- or even if we're going to adapt- to this reality. The prominence of post-modern thinking (if it can be called that) in the last few decades is certainly well known. Already there are Christians out there who have taken the approach that the United States is a mission field of sorts and like other mission fields we need to be aware of the unique cultural sensitivities we are presented with here. That means packaging the Christian faith into a story form, presenting a meta

narrative that hopefully appeals to the underlying desire for something bigger, powerful, dramatic, that resides in each of us and here in America seems to be craving and receiving most of the attention.

We can point to the rise of the Emergent church as an example of this way of thinking. The apparent successes of the Emergent church can't be denied. They've sold a lot of books and garnered a lot of attention and a lot of people are flocking to their buildings. We must admit to ourselves that there is something to the whole movement and we'll return to that before we are done.

The idea that the US is a mission field isn't something I object to. I absolutely agree. Nor do I object to observing that we may find it to be wise that we'd want to speak in the language that the natives understand within the cultural context in which they move and breathe. It is important to remember, however, that missionaries are advised to understand the language and culture but that doesn't mean that they are encouraged to accept any and all tradition, ritual, or way of thinking that they are presented with. If an African tribe engages in human sacrifice the missionary is not called to participate and even if there are certain cultural matters that we have no right to judge because they are merely different, the Christian missionary understands that there are some that are positively evil and wicked and ought not be tolerated in any culture.

So, even though we find ourself in a culture that is drenched and saturated in post-modernism and relativism it doesn't follow that we can adapt ourself uncritically to that culture. This is something that seems to be a major flaw in the Emergent church. On the other hand, it also doesn't follow that there isn't anything that we can learn from our culture. Things succeed because they resonate in some way with our experience of reality as humans. If you believe as I do that God created us in his image and that anything good, really good, comes from him, the source of all good, then it follows that when we identify things that resonate with us we might be on to something. It may be something that we can't embrace in its presented form but it might be something that we can still find room in our theology and practice to embrace in some other form.

I would also argue that according to Christian theology there isn't any good thing that should be abandoned to others. If there is something actually good in another world view or system or culture then it certainly belongs to us, heirs as we are to the kingdom of God.

I believe over the last three or centuries we've seen exactly that: an abandonment. During the enlightenment, for example, we saw the secularization of the arts and the life of the mind. Sacred art was the norm but then as intellectuals and artists alike became more secular it wasn't merely that secular art became more common. Christian artists themselves became scarce. While there was a time when the arts were subsidized by the Church, today those Christians with artistic inclinations fend for themselves in the marketplace. Outside of the Christian university, the Christian church is most likely going to fund a narrow range of skills, strengths, and passions. For example, if you're a pastor or a teacher or an administrator, or perhaps an organist and choir director, you will find that there is at least some money to back you. If you are a painter, an author, a Christian music band, or have a passion for some other more creative expression of the Christian faith, you're largely on your own. If you're lucky, there will be a publishing house or label that will pick you up but over the last thirty years or so we've seen that even Christian publishers and music labels serve other masters these days, having in many cases been bought up by secular companies and the like.

This isn't to say that we don't need to our pastors and teachers and it certainly doesn't mean that we

ought not pay them. What I am getting at is that we are in a time in our country where the people we're ministering to are most open to being evangelized to by those willing to engage them via story, through image, through music. When the US military needs to fight in places in the world that speak Farsi, they don't stop employing generals and supply managers. They do begin employing and training up those that speak Farsi. They see a need and they take steps to accommodate that need. The Church has such a need but it has been slow even to acknowledge it, let alone take steps to address it.

I am an author not a musician or a painter so that is the perspective that I'll be speaking from. I suppose a musician or a painter could expound on how society is currently geared towards receiving their message and it might differ or dovetail with what I'm saying. As an author, however, I can identify in the current culture some very substantial elements that fit into storytelling. Namely, the rise of post-modernism has reminded us of a very important truth about the nature of humanity. We love story. There is something about it that really, honestly moves us.

Story as we understand it is a somewhat new phenomena. Prior to the printing press, the written story was rare indeed. If you were going to put something down on paper it wasn't going to be something as inconsequential as story, at least not usually. Oral history and storytelling of course was very common and the traveling bard a well known fixture of ancient times. Even with the advent of the printing press it wasn't until later when publishers were producing romance novels and cheap paperbacks, capitalizing on the fact that not merely do people resonate with Story, even a crappy story can attract attention and dollars.

The relatively new medium of film has taken matters even further. I find it overwhelmingly interesting that Hollywood has figured out the power of Story even before the Christian church has. In fact, they've got it down to a science. How many movies are merely reworkings of tried and tested themes? And we aren't even usually all that insulted when the boy meets girl story is presented in yet another movie. The action adventure story is basically the same. Real innovative movies are few and far between. It is worth noting that Hollywood is in it for the money and they're inclined to put their money in the places where they think they're going to get a good return on their money. In other words, while relativism seems to carry the day, there are certain themes that resonate across the board. Hollywood knows it, knows what those themes are, and exploits it for financial gain. It is not uncommon to find a movie with religious themes and even content somewhat supportive of Christian ideals. In some cases they even seem to get it pretty well right, such as a movie like Bruce Almighty. In other cases, not so well. None of us should be fooled, however. Hollywood doesn't have any interest in promoting solid Christian content. They'll present it if it has a good chance of adding to their bottom line but if they can make money in some other way, say, a movie like the Da Vinci Code that aims to undermine the Christian faith, they have no objections.

There is no doubt in my mind that quality movies expressing an outlook favorable to Christian teachings would go a long way in helping to transform the culture, though poorly made movies (and books, for that matter) will only serve to marginalize the Christian community. But can you imagine a major Christian denomination sitting down to spend millions and millions of dollars on a big budget blockbuster movie that is thoroughly Christian in its world view? That might seem like the last place to put our hard earned dollars when you've got pastors and teachers hovering just above the poverty line and yet perhaps a series of such movies would actually serve to prepare a huge number of people to be receptive to what the pastors and teachers have to say. Not that we want to always think in these terms, but you might even say that such a campaign might put more people in the pews which would

hopefully bring more money in to pay the traditional church workers a higher salary.

That is a somewhat crass way of looking at things because after all in principle and in theory what we're really interested in is the salvation of souls.

What I'm driving at in all of this is that it is my conviction that Christianity not only can be expressed powerfully in story but that it doesn't even need to be adapted for that purpose. The doctrines of Christianity are extremely evocative in their own right and if we add to that and actually assert that they are true, well then! That is something really remarkable! That is earth shattering.

Let me give a very simple example. On the one hand we can express the doctrine of incarnation and fight back and forth about this nuance or that until we finally come to the orthodox position. We put it into a creed and we leave it there and use it as a litmus test to determine who is a Christian and who is not. But what if it is more than that? What if it is actually true? What if the teaching that God became man, really became man, is really true? What if it is not merely a particular doctrine of our particular religion that this man, Jesus, who was also perfectly God, died on a cross but also rose from the grave, but an actual event in history? That changes everything. This is a story worth telling, is it not?

Let me continue. Imagine how the story might run... humans live out their daily existence in tedium. Still, for many people, something just doesn't seem right. There is something about our experience of reality that drives us to long for more... in fact, most of us intuitively think there is more. But what is that more? Then, one day a prophet emerges. He says that he can tell you if you want to know but you have to have an open heart. A choice is made, and sure enough the illusions and delusions about reality fade away and it is discovered there is a whole other realm, a spiritual realm, if you will, with good and bad fighting it out. The battle seems hopeless with the outcome almost certainly ending with the human race in blissful ignorance of their own pitiful plight. But they have hope, those who fight this battle of righteousness because there is a prophecy about one who will come who is above and beyond the world and who will overcome it. Behold! The New Man arrives. He is killed, but he rises with a new body and new powers and now the dark enemy is on the run.

A very interesting story line to be sure and most of you I think will recognize it as the general outline of the first movie of the Matrix series. The dying and rising God motif, with twists here and there, is in fact one that powerfully moves the human soul. But here comes the critical point: In Christianity we don't merely believe that we have another version of the motif played out, our own preferred myth, rather we believe we have the definitive expression of the myth as real history. A real man claiming to be God who did real miracles in a real place at a real time surrounded by other real people who really died and really did rise from the dead, defeating death and the devil and promising to return.

It makes a fine story but don't we usually mean by 'story' something that is probably not true that has the main purpose of entertaining us? Christianity has an interesting approach here: it does not diminish or discredit the power of story but fulfills Story, and myth, much as Jesus did not come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it. The book of Hebrews serves as an evocative demonstration of the methodology of the Divine Author. The law was real, compelling, binding, and yet it is a shadow of bigger and better things eventually revealed as Jesus coursed through the Divine narrative. The Psalms call us to delight in the law of Moses and we are not asked to set aside that delight but to understand it anew in a much bigger context. I would suggest that this process of not abolishing but fulfilling and transforming is one of God's favorite narrative devices.

You see, then, that the post-modern emphasis on story and narrative is not a recent innovation at all but rather something that has been pre-figured in numerous times, places, and cultures. When leisure and resources permitted it, the human engaged in story. If there is anything new about our current expression of the power of story it is that technology has allowed ourselves to become saturated in story, so much so in fact, that even crappy stories can be told and are told and can be picked up for a dollar at the grocery store.

All of this has been said to help you understand why I believe that the artist immersed in orthodox Christian thought is uniquely placed to engage our culture. Many people perceive the Christian Gospel to be sterile dogma but if what I'm saying is true, there is nothing sterile about it, except perhaps its presentation and expression by Christians to each other and to the world.

It is no coincidence that one of the greatest apologists of the last century was also an author. CS Lewis wrote his non-fiction, of course, but we can all famously point to the Chronicles of Narnia as one of his deliberate attempts to promote the Christian faith... pre-evangelism, if you please. Then of course we can add The Screwtape Letters, the Space Trilogy, and the Great Divorce. He was a man who wrote his fiction knowing the power of fiction and possessing a mind that was fully saturated with the Christian world view. And do people find his stories boring? Not in the slightest. NonChristians, Philip Pullman excepted, are even willing to enjoy Lewis's fiction.

A lesser known apologist but confidant of CS Lewis was Dorothy Sayers. According to the foreword of a collection of her essays that I have brought along, "The Whimsical Christian" it reads:

She was slender as a young girl, stout as an adult, and tall enough to fill GK Chesterton's robes as president of the Detection Club- and he was six feet from crown to ground and four feet around the middle. She could sing, and her voice in conversation could be like a high wind, according to CS Lewis; no small wind himself, he ascribed the tone to her keen mind and extraordinary zest. She liked parties, and when the women withdrew from the room to discuss their ailments, she continued to converse with the men on the great theological and philosophical issues. She smoked and drank in the manner of the best-known Christian apologists of the century.

I don't know about you, but I would have liked to have gone to the same parties as Dorothy Sayers! Sayers, was, like Lewis an author. She was popular and well known, as the quote hints, for her detective stories and she had a series of plays on Jesus that was her own attempt to use the arts to promote orthodox Christianity.

In the collection of essays I have mentioned, there is one particular essay called "The Dogma is the Drama." It makes the point that if anyone bothered to understand what Christianity really maintains at the very least no one would find it boring or uninspiring. This is a point I agree with her on. What she doesn't address and which I would have liked to have heard is exactly why Christianity does appear to be boring and what we can do about it. The 'what we can do about it' at least is something I'll be getting to.

Before I move on, I would like to remind you that Lewis and Sayers rubbed shoulders with Tolkien and other novelists, as well. I don't think we can call it a coincidence that so much effective promotion of Christianity and its world view and ethics has been achieved by those who not merely submitted essays

but also stories. In fact, I would be remiss if I didn't call attention to another name that was in the above quote, GK Chesterton. About five years ago I recommended to an atheist friend Chesterton's book "Orthodoxy" which was quite formative for me. He is from England, as Chesterton was, and his response was: "The author of the detective novels?" Perhaps we detect a pattern, a correlation between effective apologists and popular story telling?

If there is such a correlation, then our apologetic and evangelism programs might want to take this into account and see what can be done and what should be done and how important it is that decision makers in the church don't merely pass over this apparent correlation but probe it deeply and take action that reflects the underlying truths and principles that lies underneath it.

What do I mean? I trust that most of us in this room have been exposed to evangelism programs in their churches at one time or another. You have the proclamation of the Gospel, of course, but there are usually certain preliminary steps that involve befriending someone, perhaps, or answering their objections about the Bible or Christianity, or in other words trying to prepare the ground so that the word of the Gospel will find good soil. In some programs you will have the proclamation of the Gospel alone. This might be the door to door canvas, the guy on the street with a bullhorn, the four step plan to be saved, etc. In fact, as an aside, as far as apologetics goes, some even find that it is antithetical to the promotion of the Gospel, the reasoning being that apologetics appeals to reason which is fallen and corrupted and could never be a vehicle by which a person might be saved. You're better off just proclaiming the word, and after all, God's word never returns without achieving its purpose, right?

(we'll set aside the fact that reception of the Word presupposes reason and rationality and would seemingly preclude the existence- or at least God's decision not to use- some mystical spiritual organ where the Holy Spirit is received). Don't get me started on that!

No, what I want to suggest is that for many people hearing the Gospel, whether they've had their intellectual objections responded to or not, or whether or not they've been befriended or not, the Good News doesn't strike them as Good News at all. Sure, there is that whole rescue from sin, death, the devil, and hell, but to what exactly? Eternal life? But what kind of life? To heaven? When many people think of heaven they think of clouds and choirs and sitting in a church pew for eternity and actually LIKING it. No offense, they might say, but to them praising God evermore singing insipid praise songs or dusty hymns of the reformation just isn't their bag. They might say that your message of impending doom and punishment in hell sure does sound pretty bad but your message about salvation is not exactly attractive, either.

This is a good example of a situation where I believe that the Christian poet can be of assistance. It is helpful to remind ourselves that our most beautiful images of eternal life come to us in the book of Revelation but they are... let us be clear... images. After the fires burn it all away and there is a new heaven and a new earth, God will live among us on the new earth in the new Jerusalem. In other words, for those who were intimately familiar with the old Jerusalem the imagery would make quite a bit of sense and would be quite compelling. It was a day when roads were dirty and dusty and in comparison a street of 'pure gold, like transparent glass' really communicated something. They had city walls, and city gates, and things of this sort which today of course we don't appreciate the value of- at least not in our society so much.

If John lived in the 20th century, in New York, we can bet that the imagery would have been better. Like, for example the rats were actually friendly, clean, and tasty. You get the idea. What would have charged the Jew of the first century, familiar as he was with a long series of oppressions by foreign armies and ravaging bandits, doesn't have quite the same ring for those in our time and place. Still, there are principles that John was trying to communicate that remain true even if the pictures used to communicate them today might be different. A poet who knows those principles can dig deep to cast a vision of heaven that is orthodox but compelling for 20th century Man.

I would argue that a re-imagining of heaven is a project of huge importance that ought to be undertaken just as soon as possible.

Another example where the poet can be of service concerns another area where the offered gift doesn't seem very interesting. I spoke of those who find some presentations of heaven to be positively hellish, well, there are some who present the sanctified life as boring, sanitized, and sterile. This is due, I think, to the easy emphasis by the Christian church on certain moral issues at the expense of other important moral issues. Here again the great apologists of the last century had much to say. I will submit again Dorothy Sayer's who has an essay called "The Other Six Deadly Sins." The point is that sexual transgressions is not the only area where the Christian church has historically had much to say although in the last few centuries not so much.

Today, calls to conversion are received by those who assume that if they come to Christ, not only will they have to be bored out of their mind in the name of holiness, but that holiness will mean no smoking, no swearing, no drinking, no dancing, and most of all and most depressingly, no sex. If a person is able to get past this moralizing, there is a second layer of assumption that the life of a Christian means no adventure, no quests, no battle... a man in particular might believe that becoming a Christian will mean becoming a simpering pansy who will become a doormat- and like it.

Jesus said he came to bring life and life to the fullest. What do you think? Is that also good news? When we speak of the Gospel setting us free do we only mean free from death, the devil, and damnation, or do we also mean freedom to live in bold adventure as well? What might it mean to have life and life to the fullest? I suggest that it is the poet who can help paint that picture.

Now some of what I have said will perhaps strike some of you as not really a problem to be dealt with. I obviously don't know for sure. However, this is a Lutheran campus and I anticipate that there are a fair bit of Lutherans among us. The moralizing that I described just now isn't as much of a problem in the Lutheran tradition. Lutherans are in the 'sin boldly' cloth and many of the things that some denominations get hung up on. A famous lutheran apologist that some of you may have heard of named John Warwick Montgomery used to attend Baptist conventions (by invitation, mind you) and bring bottles of wine to drink in their presence. I would suggest, then, that Lutherans are appropriately placed to take this particular topic on and I would encourage Lutherans to spend some time thinking about this.

Lest you think I exaggerate, today as I was cleaning up this text today I was sitting the Falcon Nest. I didn't mean to easesdrop but I couldn't help but hear someone declare, in a somewhat different context, that he 'couldn't trust someone who doesn't party, smoke, or drink.'

I would argue that this sort of feeling underlies a lot of resistance to the Gospel. We could go a long

way to advancing Christianity by taking aim at these less intellectual objections and I believe that story and the arts can do so.

For example, imagine a movie where the Christian is the hero and his achievements aren't merely that he died valiantly for his faith. Consider the Christian stereotype that pops up more often than not. In the movie *Contact*, it was the Christian radical freak that destroyed the wormhole machine. What if it had been a Christian at the forefront of the scientific research that detected the alien intelligence in the first place? What would that have communicated about how Christianity relates to the pursuit of truth? How would it have been different if our 'hero' was not an atheistic woman but a thoughtful, adventurous, theistic scientist?

Over time, as the narrative climate changes people may find themselves not only perceiving Christianity more realistically but they may find themselves actually resonating with it.

Now, before I go to break here and talk about how I am personally using literature to communicate Christian propositions let me make it clear that I have no desire to marginalize the role of the theologian, the pastor, the teacher. We need people in these roles just as we need the artist. We need the scholar and the philosopher and we need the poet. I fear that in the larger institutional church, however, there is an eye to supporting just a narrow range of professions for those interested in professional church work. Sometimes we will even have people who don't want to be pastors or teachers become pastors or teachers because they want to serve God and the church but the only way they could support their family is to take the traditional line. Whether these people would make better poets or not, I don't obviously know. However, my contention is that we need all kinds and in particular, in our 'story' saturated climate, we need storytellers... preferably storytellers on our side- that is to say, people with good, orthodox theology with a well thought out Christian world view. There is an old Christian song called "Why should the devil get all the good music?" Indeed. And why should he also get all the good stories, art, and movies, either?

When we come back I'm going to share with you my thoughts on how my own book, "Fidelis" is meant to promote Christianity and why it is that story works... that is, what processes are at work when we hear a story. This will require a brief chat about Richard Dawkins and Dan Dennet and certainly we all deserve a break before delving into the views represented by these two men.