

APOLOGETICS 101

What is truth and why do we care anyway?

By Andrew Baklinski

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In this series, the author lays out a common sense approach to understanding and defending the Catholic faith.

(A short preamble to clarify our terms – the term apologetics does not mean an apology in the modern understanding of the word. I am not saying I am sorry for something. What I am doing is giving a defence for something – this is an original meaning of the word ‘apologetics’)

I often like to begin my religion courses by asking the simple question: “what is the meaning of life?” I get a variety of interesting responses from my students – some say sex, some say money, some say career, family, faith, happiness, and some are just not sure as they have never thought much about such a deep question! As a class we discuss the answers given and try to get at the heart of them, try to find some common ground. Beneath the above such answers - and many more - is the idea that we are looking for happiness in life, for meaning. The question can be posed: “what will bring us that happiness, this meaning that we seek?” The answer is “Truth!” As human beings we are built to live in accord with truth. If we do, we will find happiness. If we do not, we will find emptiness.

But what is truth exactly? The famous philosopher (a word meaning *a lover of truth*) Aristotle gave us a good definition. According to him truth is simply saying of “what is” that it is, and of “what is not” that it is not. In other words, truth is what corresponds to reality. This type of truth is ‘objective’ in that it is independent of the knower and his consciousness. A good example here of what I mean by objective truth is the mathematical statement: $2+2=4$. This is a statement that is true regardless of what I think about it. It always has been true and always will be true. Now, all this might seem so self-evident that to even talk about it seems a waste of time. But it is important to clarify our words because the majority of attacks against Christianity come down in the end to the simple question: “Can we know objective truth?” When pushed into a corner a non-believer will often appeal to the lines: “We can know nothing with certainty” or “you have your beliefs and I have mine...it may be true for you, but not for me...”

The former response is called skepticism and it is immediately self-contradictory. In claiming that one can know nothing with certainty, one is claiming to know one thing at least - this one thing! Skepticism does not get us very far. The latter response is called subjectivism or relativism and this theory holds that truth is dependent on the knower. Something is true because you believe it to be true. “Different strokes for different folks” is a saying that sums up this belief. Now it is true that while not many subjectivists would hold that the sum of $2+2$ could be anything other than 4, the big problem lies in the realm of morality and religion. Remember that if truth is what we say it to be, then we are not bound by laws like the 10 Commandments or Church teaching – we get to make up our own morality and do what feels right for us. In the case of religious belief, a relativist would say that a religion is true because you feel it to be true. This makes all religions basically equal – you just pick and choose what you want because in the end they are all made up anyway. That understanding truth in these ways is devastating for Catholicism is apparent but the good news is that like skepticism, subjectivism can be easily argued against.

Moral subjectivists argue for their position in claiming that many cultures have differed in what they valued and therefore that values are subjective. Although it is true that cultures have differed about what they value, no culture ever had a complete different set of values – things like honesty, courage and self-

control have always been prized and their opposites shunned. This is a strong clue to there being objective moral laws, things that are true across the board morally speaking. Further, it is possible to say that cultures can be mistaken about values. No one in their right mind could ever defend the atrocities that occurred in Nazi Germany. Just because Nazis thought it right to murder Jews, Catholics and others, did not make it right!

Other arguments brought forth by the subjectivist camp include ideas that morality is just an evolutionary survival device, that a subjective view of morality makes for tolerance and that life is too complicated for there to be universal moral laws. The belief that morality is simply an instinct that has evolved with us to stop us from killing each other does not match up with our own moral understanding that experiences morality as something that tells us what to do with our instincts – not just an instinct itself! The idea that people who believe in subjective truth are more tolerant than those who hold to there being objective truth is also flawed in that it is often the subjectivist who is being intolerant by forcing his own subjective opinions on others. Saying that the situations that present themselves in our life are too complex to allow for objective moral laws (“we can all imagine situations where it would be alright to...”) does not in any way deny the existence of these laws. It only serves to underscore the point that these objective norms must be applied in different situations.

Religious subjectivism is a very popular stance in this day and age that equates religious truth with feeling. Whatever you feel to be true in the realm of religion is true. If your God is Jesus, great! If God is the tree next door, or a rock, go for it! If you feel in your heart that God is this way or that way, how could I tell you that you are wrong? The interesting thing however, is that a religion like Christianity deals with more than just feelings. It also deals with objective facts. Facts like “God exists”, or “Christ is risen.” These facts can be clearly looked at from a reasonable point of view. Do they square up with reality, with what makes sense or not? Is the claim logical? Is it contradictory and so forth? This is where clear thinking can come to the defence of faith and a large part of successfully doing Apologetics is found in this appeal to reason.

In conclusion, any argument that can be brought up against objective truth can be soundly refuted leaving us in the end with the understanding that truth does exist. As Christians, we need to care deeply about the truth because, as mentioned, the majority of attacks against our faith come from the idea that we cannot know truth. The Catholic faith firmly holds to there being objective truth – not truth as some abstract thing, but truth as a person. Jesus Christ Himself said “I am the way, the truth and the life.” (Jn14:6) The Church, echoing Christ’s statement has taught from the beginning that Christ is the true light that enlightens everyone!

How marvelous it is that God in His wisdom has made us for Himself and has inspired within us a zeal, a hungering for truth and happiness. I like to tell my students that we have a God-sized hole in us and that it can only be filled up by God and nothing else! As St. Augustine says in his Confessions: “You have made us for Yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in You.” May the God of truth inspire us all to a deeper understanding and love for the truth!

Next issue: “Can you ‘prove’ God exists?”

Andrew Baklinski teaches high-school religion classes and is also a Pastoral Animator at Madawaska Valley District High School in Barry’s Bay. He has an undergraduate degree from Franciscan University of Steubenville with majors in theology, philosophy and history. He has taken graduate courses from the International Theological Institute and D’Youville College.