

Evidentialist Paradigm

Sergiu Ghica

*PhD(c), Doctoral School of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Bucharest, Romania
sergiughica@yahoo.com*

ABSTRACT: This paper explores the foundations of evidentialist apologetics, the principles of the evidentialist method for defending the Christian faith, the leading representatives of this method and the basic themes addressed. It examines how evidentialists interpret the importance of historical documents, prophecies, and empirical evidence in presenting the authenticity of Christianity. Moreover, it analyzes the systems of thought of some of the most influential contemporary apologists namely John Montgomery and Josh MacDowell.

KEYWORDS: apologetics, Christian faith, argumentation, evidence, evidentialist system

1. Introduction

In the modern period, American evangelical apologetics has been dominated by the evidentialist approach. This approach focuses on presenting Christianity as based on indisputable historical facts, that are verifiable by examination of the evidence. This type of apologetic system, while recognizing that the indisputable and absolutely certain proof of Christianity lies beyond man, defends the truth claims of the faith as eminently reasonable. Specifically, evidentialist apologetics holds that these crucial truths are provable and trustworthy.

Different from classical apologetics, which defends the Christian faith in two stages (first by defending theism, then by defending claims specific to Christianity), evidentialism uses multiple lines of evidence (Meister and Swies 2012, 697) to support Christian theism as a whole.

2. Principles of the method

Evidentialist apologetics can be seen, from a certain perspective, as a subtype of classical apologetics. Both approaches seek to provide sufficient reasons, which are accessible to non-Christians, to accept Christianity. However, the evidentialist approach, which has gradually emerged over the last two centuries, has emerged as a significantly different model of apologetics. The impetus for the development of evidentialist apologetics was the rise of deism. In the early eighteenth century, modern science seemed increasingly to explain the natural world, and the Christian worldview seemed to have less and less sway over scientists. Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler, Newton, these giants of science, had completely changed the way modern people looked at the physical world. The enormous success of science encouraged many to believe that, eventually, everything could be explained naturalistically, thus eliminating the need to appeal to the existence of a supernatural Creator (Cowan 2000, 64). Deism was then a kind of way-station on the road leading to atheism: deists did not deny that God created the world and initiated the processes that govern it, but they denied that God was involved in the subsequent history of creation and humanity.

To combat deism, apologists began to construct arguments defending the supernaturalism of biblical Christianity. Essentially, they wanted the truths of Christianity to be approached scientifically and justified rationally. The dominant work of apologetics to emerge in this context was John Butler's (1736) *The Analogy of Religion*, which was the most successful and popular work of apologetics for more than a century and inspired a proliferation of apologetic works emphasizing inductive reasoning, analogous to that used in science. Indeed, Butler can arguably be called the father of evidentialism, his apologetics being only an early form of the evidentialist approach.

Evidentialism is an evidential method of apologetics, acting as an advocate for Christianity. This method combines many pieces of evidence that demand a verdict after analysis. Just as in a court of law, the evidence will tip the balance from a low level of credibility to a high level of credibility, as are the principles of the evidentialist method in defending Christianity.

3. Representatives of the evidentialist paradigm

While historical apologists share the classical apologist's emphasis on rational and evidential arguments, they challenge the need to argue for the existence of God before using historical arguments from miracles or fulfilled prophecies. According to the historical apologist, historical evidence is sufficient to prove the veracity of both Christianity and theism. After all, if one is convinced of the historicity of Christ's resurrection, it is not at all difficult to embrace the existence of a miracle-working God. Accordingly, historical apologetics is labelled a first-step approach. A common historical apologetic approach is the use of historical evidence to demonstrate the historicity of the New Testament, including the historicity of Christ's miracles, especially the resurrection. A historical apologist might argue that the historical details of the resurrection are explainable only if a God such as that described by Christianity exists.

Contemporary historical apologists include Gary Habermas, Josh McDowell and John Montgomery (Meister, Swies 2012, 718). Of the historical apologists mentioned, we briefly consider John Montgomery and Josh McDowell's model of apologetic thought.

3.1. John Montgomery

John Montgomery's numerous books and articles, years of teaching at universities in the United States and France, and public debates with Bishop James Pike, Thomas J. Altizer, and Joseph Fletcher helped him to a prominent place as a theologian, historian, advocate, and apologist. Montgomery influenced Josh McDowell, whose evidentialist apologetics gained a wide audience. In the 1970s and 1980s, Montgomery was the leading advocate of the evidentialist approach to apologetics.

Montgomery used a fact-based evidentialist approach in defending the saving gospel and the record that contains it. His best-known work, *History, Law and Christianity*, presents a "historical-legal" apologetic that sets him apart from other contemporary apologists. This work presents several attempts to determine the reliability of the New Testament Gospels. Montgomery relies on certain tests and presents a tight evidential progression (Boa and Bowman 2001, 250), culminating in proving the case for Christianity according to legal standards of evidential probability.

The outline of the historical-legal argument progresses through a series of arguments. First, Montgomery asserts that the Gospels are reliable historical documents or primary source material. Virtually all scholars (even non-Christians) agree that the Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, and Luke were written within fifty years of Christ's death, and most agree that John was written within sixty-five years of Christ's death. Challengers can check this in any credible Bible encyclopedia. In these Gospels, Christ claims to be God in human flesh (Gospel of Matthew 11:27, Gospel of John 12:45, Gospel of John 10:30, Gospel of Matthew 16:13-17). In addition, Christ's resurrection in the flesh is described in detail in all four Gospel accounts. After this, Christ's resurrection proves his claim to divinity, for if Christ is God, whatever he says is true, and Christ declared that the Old Testament was infallible (Gospel according to Matthew 5:17-19) and that the coming New Testament (written by the apostles or close associates of the apostles) would be infallible as well (Gospel according to John 14:26-27; Gospel according to John 16:12-15).

Montgomery's apologetic system is strongly empirical, with an emphasis on historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus (Montgomery 2015, 44). He sees apologetics as a kind of evangelism designed to overcome objections to the saving message of the Gospels. He

seeks to do this by grounding Christianity on historically verifiable truths, beginning with a demonstration of the reliability of the gospel records as primary historical documents. He calls on historians to suspend disbelief and honestly examine the evidence without anti-supernaturalist bias. This line of argument leads to the conclusion that Jesus' resurrection demonstrates that His divine claims are true.

In one of Montgomery's most recent presentations of his evidentialist apologetics, the apologist contrasts calls for self-validating faith experiences in Eastern religions with factual verification of the Christian faith:

Christianity, on the other hand, declares that the truth of its absolute claims is based on certain historical facts, open to ordinary investigation. These facts essentially refer to the man Jesus, the claims about Himself that He is God in human flesh, and His resurrection from the dead as proof of His deity (Montgomery 2014, 40).

In other works, he has used standard techniques of historical analysis for the truth of these facts, but in this essay, Montgomery urges the application of "legal reasoning and the law of evidence" in the approach to apologetic analysis. Montgomery's case for Christianity begins with the reliability of the New Testament writings as historical documents.

He also draws on the analysis of other legal scholars to support the conclusion that "the veracity of testamentary documents can be established in any court of law" (Forrest, Chatraw and McGrath 2020, 486).

Given the authenticity and competence of the New Testament documents, Montgomery defends their witness to Jesus Christ. He argues that in a trial, a four-fold test is passed to determine false testimony from a legal text: (a) internal defects in the witness himself, i.e., any reasons about the witness that would undermine his credibility; (b) external defects in the witness himself, i.e., reasons why the witness may be lying in this case; (c) internal defects in the testimony itself, i.e., inconsistencies in the witness's statements; and (d) external defects in the testimony itself, i.e., inconsistencies between the witness's statements and other facts or testimony from other witnesses.

Montgomery applies this test four times in an evidentialist approach and presents four reasons to conclude that the New Testament documents cannot be disputed and do not provide false testimony:

- There is no reason why the New Testament writers should be considered unreliable.
- They had no reason to lie about Jesus, and indeed they suffered greatly for their testimony to Jesus.
- The Gospel accounts differ enough to be considered independent, but they are not inconsistent with each other.
- The New Testament accounts have been abundantly confirmed by archaeological and historical studies (Montgomery 2015, 47).

Montgomery further expands the legal model and answers the question of whether the New Testament writers were trying to lie about Jesus. Montgomery argues that they could not have. Jewish religious leaders function as "hostile witnesses" because of their inability to respond to the apostles' claim that Jesus rose from the dead. He argues that secondary information is often accepted in both civil and criminal cases, where this information can be evaluated in some way.

The resurrection of Jesus as a historical event is an important argument in support of Montgomery's apologetics. We draw attention to certain key elements in the presentation of this argument developed by Montgomery. The core is the "missing body" argument. If Jesus' body did not rise from the dead, then someone must have stolen it. But the Roman authorities would not steal it because that would contribute to unrest; the Jewish authorities would not steal it because it would undermine their religious influence; and the disciples could not steal it and then lie that it had risen from the dead because they would come into conflict with the Romans and the Jewish authorities (Montgomery 2015, 70). In sum, no one

stole the body and therefore the body must have been raised from the dead. Of course, fanciful alternative explanations, such as Schonfield's Last Supper plot (according to which Jesus arranged to be crucified and managed to survive the ordeal for a long time) cannot stand, are not possible. And Montgomery debunks this argument because legal reasoning operates on probability, not possibility.

Given that Jesus rose from the dead, can this fact alone establish the truth about Jesus' deity? Montgomery answers firmly in the affirmative, arguing that "the nature of legal argument (judgments rendered on the basis of factual verdicts) rests on the ability of facts to speak for themselves" (Montgomery 2015, 206). Jesus' resurrection not only can prove his deity, it can establish the existence of God. While classical apologetics holds that God's existence must be demonstrated before attempting to establish the truth and significance of Jesus' resurrection, Montgomery, as a representative of evidentialism, consciously distinguished his apologetic method from the classical approach.

Montgomery's legal arguments for the Christian faith reveal his professional training as an English lawyer as well as an American lawyer, and build on the groundbreaking work of *Harvard Law School* professor Simon Greenleaf. Montgomery's view helps us understand why lawyers were more inclined to do apologetics than dentists or engineers. And this is not because Scripture is so intertwined with law, but because Christian truth demands serious scientific scrutiny. Montgomery has devoted his energy to establishing the authenticity of ancient biblical documents, and his conclusion is that the biblical documents are the best historically attested works in all of antiquity (Morley 2015, 293).

In the historical-legal apologetics presented by Montgomery, inquirers are invited to investigate the claims of Christianity contained in the New Testament documents as they would any other work of antiquity and to apply the reasoning of probability and the widely accepted canons of legal evidence (John 2014, 55). The importance of Montgomery's legal emphasis in apologetics can be seen in at least three ways of application. First, in the concept of probability reasoning, second, in his use of the 'burden of proof' principle, and finally, in his insistence that a verdict be reached on investigation.

Montgomery uses probability reasoning in favour of Christianity based on establishing the historicity of certain events. This means that if certain central events did not occur, Christianity is both false and virulent (Montgomery 2014, 60). Because Christianity is fact-centred, we need to understand the general nature of factual claims. Facts never rise to the level of didactic evidence and there is always the possibility of error. This leads Montgomery to conclude that Christianity is never apodictically certain because 100% certainty comes only in matters of pure logic or pure mathematics. Instead, probabilities are weighed, all the evidence is considered, like a lawyer presenting it before a court or jury, and then a decision is made. Religious claims should never be required to have a level of factual certainty that is not required in any other field.

At the same time, Montgomery points out that the "burden of proof" is a way for Christians to affirm the relevance and authenticity of Christianity. This statement has several significant, practical implications. First, Christians should recognize the importance of making the case for Christ in the agora of testable arguments. When talking about one of his many debates, Montgomery publicly noted that his goal is to win over the person in the audience who doesn't really know what to choose. His belief is that the burden of proof lies with the Christian, which basically meant that Montgomery's apologetics focuses on positive, fact-based arguments for the case of Christianity rather than tearing down the weaker arguments of other world religions.

John Montgomery has consistently defended total reliance on Scripture and used innovative techniques from other disciplines to do so. The insights of analytical philosophy and legal argumentation are present throughout his works, defending the inerrancy of Scripture. Similarly, his defense of the Gospels of Scripture also benefited from his training

in legal argumentation. The development of a legal-historical case for Christ, beginning with the factual affirmation of the primary source quality and general reliability of the Gospel records is unique among apologists (Montgomery 2015, 49).

His inexorable and judicial approach to defending the crucified Christ sets Montgomery apart from many modern apologists whose emphasis is on proving theism. Montgomery was encouraged to continue his legal training and did so with the explicit aim of integrating legal reasoning into the defense of the central claims of the Christian faith. Today, the *Academy of Apologetics, Evangelism & Human Rights* in Strasbourg, France has influenced a generation of lawyers and judges who have attended annual apologetics training courses (Montgomery 2015, 20).

Montgomery's significant impact on apologetics did not prevent him from engaging in robust public debates with renowned secularists or from having an active career in which he tried some of the most influential human rights cases at the European Court of Human Rights. He has defended the freedom to preach the Gospel in Greece (outside the influence of the Orthodox Church) as well as religious freedom for Christians in Moldova (Morley 2015, 307). Montgomery's contributions can generally be characterized as focused on the Gospel of Christ, both for those railing against the Gospel and for seekers of truth. For those railing against the gospel, he offers an impressive volume of legal, historical, philosophical, and apologetic evidential writings in which historical facts take center stage (Forrest, Chatraw, and McGrath 2020, 487).

3.2. Josh McDowell

Josh McDowell did not set out to become an apologist, a defender of the Christian faith. In his high school years, when he was an agnostic, he was challenged to prepare a paper examining the claims of Christianity from an intellectual point of view. He accepted the challenge and set out to prove that Jesus' claim to be the Son of God and the historical accuracy of Scripture cannot be trusted. In the aftermath, instead of proving the lack of historical arguments against Christianity, he converted to Christianity after finding sufficient arguments for the historicity of Jesus. He discovered that the Bible is the most historically reliable document in all of antiquity, and that Jesus' claim to be the Son of God can be objectively verified.

He began his career as an apologist as a representative of *Campus Crusade for Christ*, which was dedicated to taking the Gospel to student campuses. In addition to advocating for the Gospel among young people, Josh McDowell has organized seminars for teens and young adults, which have included campaigns advocating abstinence until marriage. Josh McDowell has lectured to over ten million young people in 84 countries and over 700 universities and college campuses. He has authored and co-authored more than 100 books with over 42 million copies in print. Unlike John Montgomery, who has no books translated into English, Josh McDowell has 19 books translated. From this perspective, McDowell is an evidentialist apologist who has significantly influenced the Romanian apologetic space. Along with Norman Geisler and Ravi Zacharias, he is the most translated apologist in Romanian.

From an apologetic perspective, his writings focused on the challenges to Christianity from those who question Christian faith and do not believe in Jesus. McDowell presents positive arguments in support of the Christian faith, pointing to historical and legal evidence to establish the authenticity of biblical texts and the divinity of Jesus Christ. In his book, *Testimonies That Demand a Verdict*, he organized his arguments by presenting a cumulative case of evidence, such as archaeological discoveries, extant manuscripts of biblical texts, fulfilled prophecies, and the miracle of Jesus' resurrection. In *More Than a Carpenter* he mixed historical arguments with legal arguments concerning direct testimony and circumstantial evidence for the life and resurrection of Jesus. He used a similar argument in his debate entitled "Was Christ crucified?" with South African Muslim Ahmed Deedat in

Durban in August 1981. Other highlights of his apologetics included challenging the methodology, assumptions and conclusions drawn in higher criticism of the Old Testament and criticism of the form and wording of the Gospels. His work in this area consisted of a popular summary of scholarly debate, especially from evangelical discussions of higher critical theories. He also gathered apologetic arguments concerning the doctrine of Jesus' divinity: a biblical defense of his deity. In two companion volumes, he and his colleague Don Stewart have addressed popular questions and objections to belief about biblical inerrancy and biblical discrepancies, Noah's Flood, and creation versus evolution.

From the perspective of evidentialist apologist Josh McDowell, Christianity appeals to history, Jesus is a historical reality that can be known like any other. Christianity is a religion of historical facts, and the purpose of McDowell's apologetics is to present these facts and to investigate whether the Christian interpretation of these facts is the most logical. The object of his apologetics is not to persuade any man to become a Christian against his will, but the Spirit of God to use these arguments to remove any rational, logical barrier between man and God. The Christian faith is an objective faith, therefore it must have an object on which all the arguments in its favour hang (Rotaru 2005, 209-231). The Christian faith that brings redemption, salvation, is a faith that establishes one's relationship with Jesus Christ (the object of faith), and in this respect Josh McDowell concludes that it is diametrically opposed to the usual, philosophical use of the term faith in the classroom. Christian faith is in Jesus Christ, its value does not hang on the believer, but it is found in the One in whom every man trusts.

Those who composed the New Testament writings related the events and messages they described as eyewitnesses or wrote from what they heard from eyewitnesses to the events. They knew the difference between myth and reality. The major difference between the events that focus on Christ (e.g. the resurrection of Jesus, the witnessing of it by the disciples) and those related to Greek mythology apply to flesh and blood people who lived in a historical moment, whereas Greek mythology is based on mythological characters who cannot be identified in the historical reality of humanity. Christianity is accused of representing a leap into darkness. This common expression is rooted in Kierkegaard's theology. For Josh McDowell, Christianity did not mean a blind leap into darkness, but rather a step into the light. He took all the evidence he could muster and put it on the scales of reason. The information and arguments that Jesus Christ is the Son of God risen from the dead weighed much heavier. All the evidence gathered was so compelling to evidentialist apologist Josh McDowell that accepting Christianity was not a leap in the dark, but rather a step into the light.

4. Conclusions

The evidentialist model recognizes that probability is inevitable. Evidentialists readily acknowledge that the conclusions available through the inductive process of historical inquiry are probable, not certain. But they hasten to add that no decision in life is made on the basis of deductive certainty. Deduction can reveal whether a conclusion follows from certain premises, but it cannot tell us whether the premises correspond to the truth about the real world. In all things, in fact, we are dependent on human observation and human interpretation, both of which are fallible. Since we will never have all the facts, we can never arrive at absolute certainty from our analysis and interpretation of the facts. But this does not prevent us from reaching conclusions and making decisions in courts of law, scientific laboratories, or business meetings (Meister, Swies 2012, 740). One of the strengths of the evidentialist approach is the use of methods of inquiry already familiar and accepted by many non-Christians. Since the goal of apologetics is to convince people of the authenticity of Christianity, or at least that it is reasonable to believe that it is true, arguments using the methods of inquiry accepted by non-Christians are more likely to be effective. And it is undeniable that evidentialist apologetics has enjoyed great success.

Evidentialists point out that everyday communication between believers and unbelievers requires ordinary logic and a world of shared experience. Without this interaction, communication and dialogue would be impossible.

References

- Boa, Kenneth Dale and M. Robert Bowman. 2001. *Faith Has its Reasons: An Integrative Approach to Defending the Christianity*. Colorado Springs: Nav Press.
- Butler, Joseph. 1736. *The analogy of religion*. Wentworth Press.
- Cowan, Steven B., ed. 2000. *Five Views on Apologetics. Counterpoints*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Forrest, Benjamin K., Joshua D. Chatraw, and Alister McGrath. 2020. *The History of Apologetics: A Biographical and Methodological Introduction*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic.
- McDowell, Josh. 2010. *Dovezi în favoarea învierii (Evidence for the resurrection)*. Oradea: Editura Scriptum.
- _____. 2015. *Necenzurat*. Oradea: Scriptum Publishing House.
- _____. 2020. *Manual de consiliere a tinerilor (Youth Counselling Manual)*. Oradea: Editura Scriptum.
- McDowell, Josh and Steward, Eds. 2015. *Generația înstrăinată (The alienated generation)*. Oradea: Editura Scriptum.
- McDowell, Josh and Norman Geisler. 2015. *Dragostea are întotdeauna dreptate. Ce faci când nu știi ce să faci? (Love is always right. What do you do when you don't know what to do?)*. Oradea: Scriptum Publishing House.
- McDowell, Josh and Sean McDowell. 2014. *Mai mult decât un simplu tâmplar (More than just a carpenter)*. Oradea: Scriptum Publishing House.
- McDowell, Josh and Thomas Williams. 2007. *În căutarea certitudinii (In search of certainty)*. Oradea: Scriptum Publishing House.
- McDowell, Sean. 2009. *Apologetics for a New Generation: A Biblical and Culturally Relevant Approach to Talking About God*. Eugene: Harvest House Publishers.
- Montgomery, John Warwick. 2001. *Faith Founded on Fact: Essays in Evidential Apologetics*. Nashville: NRP Books.
- _____. 2015. *Christianity for the Tough Minded*. Nashville: NRP Books.
- _____. 2015. *Defending the Biblical Gospel*. San Clemente: New Reformation Publication.
- _____. 2015. *Defending the Gospel through the Centuries*. San Clemente: New Reformation Publication.
- _____. 2015. *God's Inerrant Word*. Nashville: NRP Books.
- _____. 2014. *History, Law and Christianity*. San Clemente: New Reformation Publication.
- Meister, Chad V. and Swies A Khaldoun. 2012. *Christian Apologetics: An Anthology of Primary Sources*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic.
- Morley, Brian Keith. 2015. *Mapping Apologetics: Comparing Contemporary Approaches*. Westmont: InterVarsity Press.
- Rotaru, Ioan-Gheorghe. 2005. *Istoria Filosofiei, de la începuturi până la Renaștere (The History of Philosophy from the Beginning until the Renaissance)*. Cluj-Napoca: Universitara Clujeana Publishing House.