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Reflections on the changing landscape of apologetics

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Abstract

This essay investigates one aspect of the relationship between contemporary apologetics and cultural studies. It begins with a consideration of Avery Dulles' famous *History of Apologetics*. While noting the many virtues of Dulles' work, it critiques his lack of attention to the role of imagination, emotion, narrative, and personal testimony. The essay argues that Dulles' work shows how constricted the study of apologetics has often been in comparison with its practice. The essay goes on to note recent developments in research into apologetics which have begun to apply recent philosophical and theological interest in narrative, imagination, and the emotions to this field. It explores the increasingly sophisticated conceptual apparatus available for this task, in particular the concepts of the Social Imaginary and the Overton Window. Finally, the essay attempts a dialogue with certain aspects of secular advocacy, in relation to the role of emotion in the public square. It concludes that the use of conceptual resources from other disciplines, and engagement in dialogue with secular advocacy, may be of benefit to apologetics.

Keywords

Apologetics, Overton Window, Social Imaginary, Imagination, Emotion, Affect

Introduction

Avery Dulles' *A History of Apologetics* has been for long a standard work.[1] It is a remarkable accomplishment: many readers may simply have marvelled at how one man could know so much of such a vast subject, the scope of his study stretching over so many centuries. It seems almost churlish to critique such an achievement, and yet Dulles' work may be argued to embody a particular concept of apologetics which

[1] Avery Dulles, *A History of Apologetics*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005).

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has itself constrained and limited analysis of this important branch of theology.

To see how this may be so, let us consider the structure and content of Dulles' great work. It discusses and summarizes the work of a vast parade of significant apologists, whose rational arguments for the Christian faith Dulles brilliantly summarizes; his focus is expository more than critical, although he does offer a certain element of critique, particularly in the summaries with which he ends his chapters. The very structure of the book embodies several limiting assumptions about apologetics. First, it is more a chronicle of eminent apologists than a holistic history of apologetics: Dulles does not give the same attention to analysing the effects of all these arguments for faith as he does to expounding the arguments themselves. Thus, the effect of his history is to suggest that apologetics is predominantly concerned with a series of rational arguments, delivered at a high intellectual level, often by academics in academic contexts.

The dominance of this assumption in Dulles' work leads to certain very important omissions. First, Dulles gives very little attention to the affective aspects of apologetics. He does note the importance of imagination, narrative, and personal testimony at the beginning of his study, but then neglects these aspects of his subject almost entirely. This leads him to focus on highly intellectual forms of 'direct' apologetics – works written for specific purpose of making sophisticated rational arguments for Christianity – rather than the 'indirect' forms in which imaginative and emotional apologetics are often couched – such as fiction, journalism, and (auto)biography, let alone non-written forms such as public events, interviews, the oral sharing of stories. He also gives little attention to other interdisciplinary aspects of his subject, such as the need to combine literary, historical, social and cultural analyses with theological analysis in the study of 'indirect' apologetics. Moreover, Dulles' focus on highly intellectual 'direct' apologetics leads him to disregard popular apologetics almost entirely, and to ignore the element of 'indirect' apologetics which numerous Christian apologists have embodied in popular cultural forms, such as cinema and popular literature[2] – the detective story, for example – or that which sometimes accompanies the evangelistic activities of churches.

Questions concerning Affect and Definition

The limitations of Dulles' approach were surprising enough when the first edition of his book was published in 1971; they were positively

[2] Dulles does give the occasional, brief nod to fictional works which contain an element of apologetics, C.S. Lewis's science fiction novels, for example, but very largely treats such works of the imagination as peripheral to his subject. See Dulles, *History of Apologetics*, p. 318.

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startling by the time the second edition came out in 2005. Even by 1971, there was a long history of imaginative apologetics, which Dulles to a great extent neglected. To take just one example, of the very many possible, consider the enormously popular British tradition of indirect apologetics embodied in fiction found in the works of authors such as George MacDonald, John Henry Newman, Robert Hugh Benson, G.K. Chesterton, Charles Williams, Dorothy L. Sayers, J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and others. Yet, in 1971, Dulles was far from alone in his neglect: the theory of apologetics was largely restricted to a very partial analysis of its praxis. There were, of course, certain notable exceptions. Newman, for one, very thoroughly drew attention to the role of imagination in relation to apologetics in both his *University Sermons* and *A Grammar of Assent*.[3] Yet his ideas regarding the imagination and emotions, and those of Coleridge[4] and others, were very little attended to by scholars of apologetics such as Dulles.

By 2005, however, the situation was being transformed by the 'affective turn' in philosophy and theology. In recent decades, a torrent of books and articles has addressed the roles of imagination and emotion in the context of these disciplines,[5] so that by 2011, a renowned theologian such as Rowan Williams could write, without fear of contradiction: 'no system of perceiving and receiving the world can fail to depend upon imagination'.[6] By 2020, the equally eminent ethicist Oliver O'Donovan could insist, with similar assurance: 'There is no need to apologize for feeling these days. The reign of the clear-thinking rationalist and his icebox brain has long gone; all philosophers today interpret feeling as a way of knowing'.[7]

[3] John Henry Newman, *Newman's University Sermons: Fifteen sermons preached before the University of Oxford 1826-43*, Donald M. MacKinnon & J. Derek Holmes, ed. (London: SPCK, 1970), see, for example, p. 122. John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Notre Dame, Ind; London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), see, for example, pp. 93-96, 106-111.

[4] See, for example, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria; or, biographical sketches of my literary life and opinions* (London: Rest Fenner, 1817).

[5] Among endless possible examples, one might cite: Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's knowledge essays on philosophy and literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of thought: the intelligence of emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Paul D. L. Avis, *God and the creative imagination: metaphor, symbol, and myth in religion and theology* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1999). Mark Wynn, 'Religion and the Revelation of Value: The Emotions as Sources of Religious Understanding', in T.W. Bartel, ed., *Comparative Theology: Essays for Keith Ward* (London: SPCK, 2003).

[6] Rowan Williams, Series Introduction to the series 'The Making of the Christian Imagination', in Ralph C. Wood, *Chesterton: the Nightmare Goodness of God* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2011), pp. vii-ix.

[7] Oliver O'Donovan, 'Mapping the Terrain for Engagement on Human Sexuality,' *Covenant*, the weblog of the Living Church Foundation. <https://livingchurch.org/covenant/2020/11/10/mapping-the-terrain-for-engagement-on-human-sexuality/> (accessed 20 April 2021). O'Donovan's words might be compared with the traditional Caribbean saying, 'Who

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The 'affective turn' is increasingly influencing studies of apologetics. One landmark was the volume *Imaginative Apologetics*, edited by Andrew Davison in 2011, and including several important essays by contributors including John Milbank, Graham Ward, Alison Milbank, John Hughes, and Michael Ward. Numerous other works have explored the role of the affective in relation to apologetics,[8] and with that development has come a greater attention to the role of narrative[9] because, in Martha Nussbaum's words, emotions 'are taught, above all, through stories', which, 'once internalized … shape the way life feels and looks'.[10] Finally, in 2020, the 'affective turn' reached the reference shelf for students of this subject with the publication of Zondervan's *The History of Apologetics*.[11]

In several ways, Zondervan's history is positioned as an updated version of Dulles' work, almost exactly fifty years on. It follows a parallel form, with one very important addition. That is to say, it is also structured as a chronicle of eminent apologists, albeit restricting itself to a more detailed treatment of a smaller number of writers. It adds to Dulles' range with regard to fuller treatment of Eastern Orthodox apologetics, but brings in its own biases, with an emphasis on the work of Protestant, American, and other Anglophone apologists alongside the omission of authors such as Chateaubriand and Blondel, von Balthasar, and Rahner.

The most significant new feature of this book is a focus on methodology: it is subtitled 'A Biographical and Methodological Introduction'. This brings a new dimension to this collection, in comparison with Dulles' book. It allows for much greater attention to be paid to the role of imagination, emotion, and narrative, although that invitation is taken up with uneven success by the various contributors. Nevertheless, the Zondervan collection demonstrates that a concern for methodology is now firmly established in the theory of apologetics; this greatly broadens its scope for analysis of the multifarious ramifications to be found

feels it, knows it;' proverbial wisdom has accorded imagination and emotion roles in cognition for unnumbered years.

[8] See Holly Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian imagination: an integrated approach to defending the faith* (Steubenville: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2017).

[9] See Alister E. McGrath, *Narrative Apologetics: sharing the relevance, joy, and wonder of the Christian faith* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2019).

[10] Martha Nussbaum, 'Narrative Emotions: Beckett's Genealogy of Love', in Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's knowledge: essays on philosophy and literature* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 286-313 (p. 287).

[11] Benjamin K. Forrest, Josh Chatraw, Kirk & Alister E. McGrath, ed., *The history of apologetics: a biographical and methodological introduction* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Academic, 2020). It is perhaps unsurprising that it should give less coverage to Catholic apologists than Dulles, yet, the Catholic critic might ask: if Jonathan Edwards is admitted under the heading of 'Dogmatics as apologetics', and William Lane Craig and Alvin Plantinga gain entrance as philosophical apologists, what of Karol Wojtyla and Joseph Ratzinger?

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in the praxis of apologetics, and opens up very many lines of enquiry into both direct and indirect apologetics, at the popular as well as the academic level. It is a sign of a major advance in this discipline: the study of apologetics is increasingly paying attention to the range and scope of its practice. The book's focus is still, however, very largely on chronicling the rational arguments put forward by a set of eminent thinkers, with the result that a rounded history of apologetics remains to be written.

The increasingly visible broadening of the scope of the study of apologetics, in both its direct and indirect forms, raises questions of definition. Where do the boundaries of apologetics lie? For instance, where works of fiction or texts in disciplines such as literary criticism contain elements of indirect apologetic, without being primarily categorised under the heading of apologetics, how does the study of such texts relate to that of direct apologetics? Moreover, the study of the indirect apologetics of the imagination cannot be limited to the study of texts alone. This brings us to what might be called the apologetics of cultural engagement, which includes aspects of semiotics in its scope. Such cultural engagement might expand the definition of its discipline considerably; areas of Christian interaction with the non-religious world which would not have been considered under the heading of apologetics (considered as a study of discursive reason) become relevant when imagination and emotion are part of the picture. Scholars of apologetics might in future study, alongside rational arguments, matters they have in the past studied far less, such as the role of the arts, of sociological and cultural factors, of non-verbal signs generally alongside the traditional logocentrism found in this field. From the viewpoint of cultural apologetics such signs demonstrate the significance of the visual and the musical, the rhetorical, the cultural more generally, and the organizational, in the apologetics of affect and invite analysis from perspectives which bring together theology and cultural studies. These were not topics which featured in Dulles' history, yet semiotics and apologetics may have more to do with each other than has hitherto been acknowledged.

Navigational Aids for the Apologetics of Affect

If apologetics is a more multi-dimensional subject than certain past categorisations have allowed, students of this subject will need a more developed conceptual apparatus than was once the case. Interdisciplinary approaches are proving of value in discovering such conceptual resources. For instance, one of the authors studied in the Zondervan tome is the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, who has provided perhaps the most influential single expression of the 'affective turn' in his idea of 'the social imaginary'. This idea is at the heart of his 2007 work,

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A Secular Age, in which he constructs a narrative which accounts for the transformation of the religious Europe of 1500 to the secular Western world of 2000. Taylor himself has described the concept of the social imaginary as 'the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations'.[12] As Graham Ward noted in a 2010 review article on *A Secular Age*, Taylor had previously worked at 'the intersection of philosophy, history, ethics, sociology and political science'; in *A Secular Age* he added a new element to his work, positioning himself 'explicitly as a Catholic thinker, and something of a religionist'.[13] This added an intersection with apologetics to those with all the other fields with which his philosophical work had already engaged.

Taylor's work has spawned an academic mini-industry of commentary and discussion; space does not allow for full engagement with those very extensive discussions.[14] Instead, I will comment on two areas particularly relevant for the study of apologetics, which is itself being increasingly influenced by Taylor's work.[15] These are issues concerning the homogeneity and the means of causation of a 'social imaginary'. In 2002, Taylor began his narrative with 'a new conception of the moral order of society' which, at first, 'was just an idea in the minds of some influential thinkers'; he went on to ask: 'What exactly is involved when a theory penetrates and transforms the social imaginary?'[16] Alongside this theoretical basis, he has acknowledged the complexities of 'the question of causation' and the 'multiple factors operating behind the rise of modernity',[17] yet his discussions of the formation of social imaginaries consistently centre on the insights of great thinkers, whose influence then trickles down into the imaginations of the general population.[18]

It may be argued, however, that the two most significant changes to the Western social imaginary in the last half-century are those brought

[12] Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 23-30.

[13] Graham Ward, 'History, Belief and Imagination in Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*', *Modern Theology* 26, no. 3 (2010), pp. 337-48 (p. 338).

[14] See, for example, *Working with a Secular Age. Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Charles Taylor's Master Narrative* (De Gruyter, 2016).

[15] See Bruce Riley Ashford & Matthew Ng, 'Charles Taylor: Apologetics in a Secular Age', in Forrest, Chatraw, and McGrath, ed., *History of Apologetics*, pp. 674-95.

[16] Charles Taylor, 'Modern Social Imaginaries', *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (2002), pp. 91-124 (pp. 92, 111).

[17] Charles Taylor, with Ulf Bohmann & Dario Montero, 'History, Critique, Social Change and Democracy: An Interview with Charles Taylor', *Constellations* 21, no. 1 (2014): pp. 3-15 (p. 10).

[18] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

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about by the sexual revolution and the environmental crisis; neither of these resulted from the cogitations of philosophers. That forces independent from human reason might cause changes in social imaginaries is not a new phenomenon: Augustine's *City of God* was far more concerned with challenges to the social imaginary following from the barbarian invasions and the fall of Rome than those raised by neo-Platonic philosophers; the research of Marek Sullivan and others has demonstrated that even the key thinkers of the Enlightenment themselves worked much more in the realm of affect than their overt elevation of pure reason might suggest – Sullivan describes the Enlightenment as an 'emotive, nationalistic, and often xenophobic phenomenon'.[19] In short, with regard to the causation of social imaginaries, Taylor and others may still need to consider further the relative importance of sociological, economic, cultural and other factors, in relation to the purely intellectual. The particular relevance of this issue of causation to apologetics concerns the balance and the calibration of the tasks of apologetics: apologists attempt, in multiform ways, to bring about changes in understanding; the weighting of the factors which collectively bring about changes in social imaginaries is an important influence on how they approach this task.

With regard to the homogeneity of the social imaginary, Taylor himself has acknowledged the problematic nature of the relationship between 'the big picture' and the 'micro-steps … micro-moves … micro-stories' by which social imaginaries develop.[20] This issue is increasingly important because of globalization and the influence of the internet, especially social media. Taylor has often used the term 'the social imaginary' as if speaking of something united and homogeneous, for instance when contrasting 'the Indian "social imaginary"' with the social imaginary of 'Western modernity'.[21] Yet, in a globalized world, all parts of which are linked by the internet, a social imaginary must be more of a mosaic than a monolith, constantly modulating and developing in face of the crises and changes which characterise the contemporary world. In any large city, immigrant communities, religious communities, and other minority groups inhabit social imaginaries significantly different from that which is dominant in their society. A social imaginary may describe the climate, yet within that horizon many changing micro-climates exist. Nor is it just a matter of micro-climates: the events of the Trump years in the U.S. may suggest a rift in the American social imaginary itself, while the

[19] Augustine, *Concerning the City of God, against the Pagans* (London: Penguin, 1984). Marek Sullivan, 'Cartesian Secularity: "Disengaged Reason," the Passions, and the Public Sphere Beyond Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (2007)', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 87, no. 4 (2019), pp. 1050-84 (p. 1081).

[20] Charles Taylor, 'Interview with Charles Taylor', pp. 3-15 (pp. 11-12).

[21] Charles Taylor, 'Interview with Charles Taylor', pp. 3-15 (pp. 5-6).

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Covid crisis, the climate crisis, and other traumas of our time mean that a social imaginary must lead a troubled if not a torn existence, or, at the least, enjoy an unquiet sleep. How to relate the 'big picture' to these changing elements within it?

The discipline of political science has provided a concept which may be useful in this connection. In the 1990s, the political researcher Joseph Overton came up with the concept of 'the Overton Window of Political Possibilities'. This idea is visualised as a yardstick that 'represents the full political spectrum for a particular issue'. Between the ends of this yardstick 'lie all gradations of [political] policy from one extreme to the other. The essence of the Overton window is that only a portion of this policy spectrum is within the realm of the politically possible at any time'. Politicians operate within this 'window of the politically possible'. Overton argued, therefore, that think tanks and other campaigners should not focus on changing particular policies but on attempting 'to change the political climate', so as to move the 'window of the politically possible'.[22]

This concept has rapidly found a role in other disciplines, while remaining much used in the world of politics.[23] It is invoked by epidemiologists discoursing on 'The Overton Window and a Less Dogmatic Approach to Antibiotics';[24] legal academics meditate on 'Brexit, Gender Justice and the Overton Window';[25] it is denounced as a 'Manipulative Mechanism of Public Values Transformation' by Oleksandr Valentinovich Karpenko, 'Chairman of the Information Policy and Digital Technologies Faculty, National Academy of Public Administration, under the President of Ukraine'.[26] This is clearly a term capable of finding profitable employment in many different contexts – indeed, it is in danger of becoming ubiquitous. In the context of apologetics, one fruitful role might be in assisting those who wish to map or make changes in the 'micro-climates' which make up a social imaginary: the Overton Window provides a simple, easily useable concept with which to frame and measure such changes.[27]

[22] Nathan Russell, 'An Introduction to the Overton Window of Political Possibilities', <https://www.mackinac.org/7504> [accessed 7th May, 2019]. The author of this paper would like to thank Jonathan Pickering for introducing him to the Overton Window.

[23] See, among many examples, Paul Glastris, 'Hillary Opens the Overton Window', *The Washington Monthly* 48, no. 11/12 (2016), p. 7.

[24] Daniel J. Morgan, 'The Overton Window and a Less Dogmatic Approach to Antibiotics', *Clinical Infectious Diseases* 70, no. 11 (2020), pp. 2439–41.

[25] Moira Dustin, Nuno Ferreira & Susan Millns, 'Conclusion: Brexit, Gender Justice and the Overton Window', in *Gender and Queer Perspectives on Brexit*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 463-72.

[26] Oleksandr Valentinovich Karpenko, 'The "Overton Window" as Manipulative Mechanism of Public Values Transformation', *National Academy of Managerial Staff of Culture and Arts Herald*, no. 1 (2019), pp. 51-54.

[27] This climate analogy is far from new in this field. C.S. Lewis wrote of the apologist's task in terms of spreading 'an intellectual (and imaginative) climate favourable to Christian-

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If it be accepted that one part of the apologist's task is to try to 'move the Overton Window' in one specific intellectual and imaginative 'micro-climate' or another, then it may be of value to place apologetics in dialogue with other forms of advocacy which, in their different contexts, have 'moved the Overton Window'. For instance, the environmental protection movement and the gay rights movement have influenced vast changes in the 'window of possible beliefs' in their areas of activity over the last half-century. Could a dialogue with representatives of these movements discover resources that might assist Christian apologetics in the new landscape of the twenty-first century? Could analysis of the mastery of the use of emotion and imagination displayed by some forms of secular advocacy assist in the development of contemporary apologetics, in particular the apologetics of affect? To be clear, this is not to suggest that Christian apologists might uncritically adopt the conceptual tools and the strategies of secular advocacy, rather, it is to argue that dialogue with such advocacy, and analysis of its tools and strategies, may assist apologetics in engaging fruitfully with social realities which are strongly influenced by various forms of secular advocacy, and may open up possibilities for further study with respect to certain conceptual resources.

Affect, Secular Advocacy, and Apologetics

I will conclude this essay by attempting one such dialogue, in the attempt to illuminate one of the most obvious issues facing apologetics today: the relationship between reason and emotion in public discourse. The affective turn in philosophy and theology finds curious parallels in the turn towards, and emphasis on, emotion and imagination in many parts of the public square. In 2017, Mark Turnbull, the former managing director of Cambridge Analytica, the infamous and enormously effective British political consulting firm, asserted: 'It's no good fighting an election campaign on the facts, because actually it's all about emotion'.[28] Much commentary has reached similar conclusions.[29] Moreover, the relationship between reason and emotion in the public square must have an effect on their relationship in the ordinary person's private thinking; the public influences the private, and the multi-faceted

ity'. C.S. Lewis, *Essay Collection & Other Short Pieces* (London: Harper Collins, 2000), p. 182.

[28] Channel 4 News, 'Cambridge Analytica Uncovered: Secret filming reveals election tricks', 19th March 2018. See < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mpbeOCKZFfQ> (accessed 5th May, 2021).

[29] See, among many examples, Colin Crouch, 'Balancing reason and emotion in democracy', The British Academy Blog, 23 February 2017, <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/blog/balancing-reason-and-emotion-democracy/> (accessed 7 May 2021).

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media discourse of our time, online and in traditional forms, has great power. This situation has been discussed by endless commentators, including one of Britain's most eminent authors, Philip Pullman, who lamented: 'How do we change people's minds? The only way to do it is with emotion really … Terrible thing to have to admit, but reason doesn't work'.[30] Must apologetics operate in a world in which, as Pullman puts it, 'reason doesn't work'?

If we wish to analyse this phenomenon, we can find a remarkably lucid exposition of the strategies which have so foregrounded the role of emotion in public discourse in a masterful work of advocacy produced by two Harvard-trained authors, Marshall Kirk and Hunter Madsen: the gay rights strategy document they titled *After the Ball: How America will conquer its fear and hatred of gays in the 90s*. Although thirty years old, this prescient text anticipated several of the most important recent developments in the relationship between reason and emotion in the public square, far beyond the particular campaign it was created for; it remains perhaps the most illuminating discussion of those developments.

Kirk and Madsen saw themselves as battling unthinking prejudice and therefore chose not to employ rational argument, because it is 'impossible' to change the belief of a 'bigot' by such means. On the basis of this sweeping judgement, they chose instead to aim for an 'effect' which would be 'achieved without reference to facts, logic, or proof' by 'a program of unabashed propaganda, firmly grounded in long-established principles of psychology and advertising'.[31] The word 'propaganda' has an unfortunate history, and they were careful to clarify what they meant by it. They defined propaganda thus: 'The term "propaganda" applies to any deliberate attempt to persuade the masses via public communications media'. They then made three comments: first, they acknowledged that 'propaganda relies more upon emotional manipulation than upon logic' but considered it justified in their campaign to change public negative emotions towards gay people, 'elicit friendly feelings' and 'dampen hatred'. Secondly, they were clear that they eschewed the 'outright lies', which have often characterised propaganda campaigns. Thirdly, they acknowledged that 'propaganda can be unabashedly subjective and one-sided' but insisted that 'there is nothing necessarily wrong with this. Propaganda tells its own side of the story as movingly (and credibly) as possible'.[32]

[30] Philip Pullman interview, 'My daemon is a raven, a bird that steals things', in *The Observer*, 22 October 2017, < https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/oct/22/philip-pullman-my-daemon-is-a-raven-la-belle-sauvage-interview-questions> (accessed 7 May 2021).

[31] Marshall Kirk & Hunter Madsen, *After the Ball: How America will conquer its fear and hatred of gays in the 90s* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), pp. 152-53, xxvi.

[32] Kirk & Madsen, *After the Ball*, pp. 161-63.

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Kirk and Madsen recorded a very clear decision regarding the importance of the media. They cited a 1988 '"war conference" of leading gay activists' whose final statement concluded: 'We must consider the media in every project we undertake. We must, in addition, take every advantage we can to include public service announcements and paid advertisements, and to cultivate reporters and editors of newspapers, radio, and television'. This statement insisted: 'Our media efforts are fundamental to the full acceptance of us in American life'.[33] If the media had 'fundamental' importance to advocacy in 1988, this has only increased since, and layers of influence and complexity have been added to it with the development of social media, online news media and other online media-related forums. Modern masters of media manipulation such as Cambridge Analytica have far more sophisticated tools at their disposal than were available at that time. Covid seems likely to entrench the influence of online media and deepen it further.

Space does not allow for full analysis of Kirk and Madsen's sophisticated and brilliant strategy; we can only briefly discuss certain features of their approach which remain particularly relevant today. They suggested three stages in changing attitudes. First, 'Desensitization': disarming emotional hostility towards their community by stressing its commonalities with wider society and minimising perception of its differences. Secondly, 'Jamming,' which 'jams' the existing emotional negative responses of the public towards a particular community by triggering incompatible emotional responses. This makes use of two psychological processes. This first is Associative Conditioning, 'the psychological process whereby, when two things are repeatedly juxtaposed, one's feelings about one thing are transferred to the other' – for instance, linking prejudice against gay people to racism, so that revulsion against racism is transferred to revulsion against anti-gay prejudice. It also uses 'Direct Emotional Modelling', 'the inborn tendency of human beings to feel what they perceive others to be feeling' – as in advertisements showing opponents of gay rights as 'bigots … being critized, hated, and shunned' so that viewers perceive that ordinary people criticize, hate, and shun opponents of gay rights, and 'transfer' those emotions to themselves.[34]

The final stage, 'conversion', was to be achieved by associating gay people with those loved and esteemed by wider society, for instance by presenting the public with 'literal picture/label pairs, in magazines, and on billboards and TV, of gays [who] … are carefully selected to look either like the bigot and his friends, or like … the kind of people he already likes and admires'. 'Conversion' also uses Associative Conditioning and Direct Emotional Modelling: the first to transfer the

[33] Kirk &Madsen, *After the Ball*, p. 163.
[34] Kirk & Madsen, *After the Ball*, pp. 148-53.

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positive emotions the public feels towards those they like and admire to the gay community; the second to picture to the public their kind of people 'associating with gays in good fellowship'. They stressed that images, not words, were central to their campaign, because 'pictures are stronger than words and evoke emotional responses more powerfully'. They anticipated possible objections to their strategy thus: 'The objection will be raised … that we are exchanging one false stereotype for another equally false; that our ads are lies … Yes, of course – we know it, too. But it makes no difference that the ads are lies; not to us, because we're using them to ethically good effect, to counter negative stereotypes that are every bit as much lies, and far more wicked ones'.[35] They were, of course, not the first social reformers to insist that the end justifies the means. The strategies and tactics which they pioneered in what they saw as a moral crusade are now widely employed without such motivation, in political and other campaigns, in ever more sophisticated forms.[36]

Several aspects of their agenda are clearly morally problematic, yet others might usefully be interrogated by proponents of an apologetics of affect, with the proviso that in apologetics affective persuasion and rational argument are colleagues, not decoupled as they were in *After the Ball*. One commonality is that Kirk and Madsen wrote as defenders of a community suffering discrimination; in many parts of the world, Christians are discriminated against and marginalised. In such contexts, strategies such as 'Desensitization' could disarm hostility and prepare the ground for dialogue and apologetic; apologists finding ways to communicate the commonalities linking them with their non-religious interlocutors, rather than just talking about religious matters, might build bridges to dialogue partners. Christian theologians might ask if there are morally acceptable uses for Associative Conditioning and Direct Emotional Modelling in apologetics, and, if not, what forms of imaginative association are acceptable, as complements to rational argument, not replacements for it. The primacy of the image over the word in *After the Ball* is not something likely to be replicated by apologists, yet it raises questions for communications strategies, for example regarding the role of the arts – how far can the role of art and the visual media generally be developed in apologetics? As for media strategy, this is an issue with which apologetics, evangelization, and the churches in general must necessarily engage more and more.

In the years since Kirk and Madsen penned their strategy manifesto, the 'principles of psychology and advertising' which 'grounded' their concept of 'propaganda' have become prevalent in political and other

[35] Kirk & Madsen, *After the Ball*, pp. 153-56.

[36] See, among a great many examples, 'The Cambridge Analytica Files', on *The Guardian* website, < https://www.theguardian.com/news/series/cambridge-analytica-files> (accessed 7 May 2021).

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public debates. This development has contributed to the seemingly dominant role of emotion in public debate and to the perception that we live in a 'post-truth' society.[37] To cite one morally questionable example, Erin Steuter and Deborah Wills, in their study of the role of the media and propaganda in relation to the 'War on Terror', suggest that propaganda has played a significant role in that 'war' and arrive at a description of propaganda which has much overlap with Kirk and Madsen's: 'Propaganda is not concerned with disseminating information but with rallying emotion. … Propaganda's intent is not to educate but to generate and direct emotion … Its most essential task, and its most dangerous, is to ensure that public emotion dominates public discussion'.[38] Kirk and Madsen viewed propaganda more positively because they were convinced of the righteousness of their cause, yet the research of Steuter and Wills, alongside the example of Cambridge Analytica and numerous other morally dubious political players, strongly reminds the reader of its dangers.

The significance of these social and political realities for the tasks of apologetics may be seen more clearly in the light of a remark of Oliver O'Donovan: 'Different trains of theological thought may acquire greater or lesser apologetic weight circumstantially, as the crises or doubts of the culture may dictate at any moment. One train of Christian thought that carries apologetic weight in our times is the capacity of faith to display the intelligibility of political institutions and traditions'.[39] The corollary to O'Donovan's observation is that the capacity of 'Christian thought' to deconstruct political institutions, traditions, and issues, revealing flaws which expose underlying philosophical incoherence, also 'carries apologetic weight in our times'.

Apologetics may eschew propaganda, yet it has to work in a world hugely influenced by the mastery of affect demonstrated by such forms of secular advocacy. Apologetics may wish to insist on the value of reason, but it must operate in a public realm where emotion does indeed appear to dominate much public discourse: the 'principles of psychology and advertising' which have been so powerful for so long in business and commercial contexts are now prevalent in political and other areas of public life. Forms of propaganda which closely resemble the descriptions cited above have come to play a substantial part in the political world, and become an influence on much public discussion

[37] Oxford Languages, part of Oxford University Press (OUP), made 'post-truth' its 'Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year' in 2016. OUP defined 'post-truth' thus: 'Relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.' See <https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2016/> (accessed 12 May 2021).

[38] Erin Steuter & Deborah Wills, *At War with Metaphor: Media, Propaganda, and Racism in the War on Terror* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008), p. 18.

[39] Oliver O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), p. xiii.

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beyond politics, even if their proponents do not often share Kirk and Madsen's willingness to name openly what they do.

Conclusion

This brief dialogue with aspects of secular advocacy has attempted to demonstrate that there is a fundamental contradiction embedded in the way that much commentary on contemporary public discourse is presented to the public. This commentary is largely framed in terms of the power of emotion in the public sphere, and the relegation of reason to a less influential place, yet those who shape public discussion are often working on the basis of sophisticated, highly rational analyses. The commentary which suggests that 'reason doesn't work' and emotion has taken over public discourse is extremely misleading. Rather than being banished, reason has become the 'invisible man' of the public square, present yet unseen, using emotion and imagination as weapons rather than respecting them as partners, guiding debates with which it appears to have no connection. Extremely rational actors, behind the scenes, use the strategies and tactics discussed above to work a kind of alchemy, transmuting their logical plans into emotional and imaginative forms.

The examples discussed above show powerful opinion-formers shaping the public's emotions in ways that reserve agency for themselves, manipulating 'the masses' rather than seeking to engage individuals and groups within the broader community as genuine conversation partners. Apologetics has traditionally set a higher value on ordinary people, and this is likely to become an increasingly distinctive characteristic in a world in which well-resourced campaigns use the 'principles of psychology and advertising' so effectively to influence media discourse, and hence public emotion.

Moreover, the emotion/reason divide, as presented above, downplays the role of imagination. Recent discussions of affect remind us of the close relationship between imagination and emotion, and thus broaden out the analytical framework of these secular commentators into a three-cornered conversation between reason, imagination, and emotion, characterised by several levels of complex interaction between each of these. Apologists in the past, such as Dulles, may have emphasised the role of reason too much; apologists in the present face a struggle to reassert the relevance of reason, not just as a covert shaper of emotion, working beneath the surface, but also as an overt participant in the discourse of an era when reason sometimes appears to need to be embodied in emotional forms to gain a hearing in the public space. After being attacked so often by the Enlightenment's children for being irrational, Christianity now appears as an increasingly isolated defender of a visible and undisguised place for reason in public discourse, and of

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uses of reason which respect the dignity of ordinary people and shape public discourse with integrity, rather than cold-blooded manipulation.

As apologists wrestle with these issues, the affective turn in theology and philosophy and the turn to emotion and imagination in the public square have stimulated many new lines of enquiry. Alongside the traditional research into direct forms of apologetics, often based on logical argument, increasing attention is being paid to indirect forms of *apologia*, many of which centre on imagination and emotion, sometimes involving literary and other arts. All around the world, apologists have been reflecting on these matters and many innovative approaches are being explored. At the popular level, ministries of evangelization such as Bishop Robert Barron's *Word on Fire* Institute or the *Alpha* and *Christianity Explored* courses include increasingly subtle and varied elements of popular apologetics in their presentations, together with progressively more sophisticated use of the internet.[40] At the academic level, initiatives abound. Alister McGrath, for instance, has related a broad vision of natural theology to the field of apologetics, suggesting that this can facilitate the attempts of apologetics to 'open up alternative readings of our world … by capturing the cultural imagination with a richer and deeper vision of reality … This re-orientation will not arise from the cold certainties of closed logical argument, but from the open imaginative embrace of a luminous and compelling vision of truth, beauty, and goodness'.[41]

Attempts to communicate such visions in face of the limits of 'the immanent frame'[42] of the Western social imaginary may benefit from analysis of the most successful forms of secular advocacy. Such analysis also has the potential to provide apposite conceptual tools and to assist apologists in creating strategies which combine reason and affect in balanced, holistic, and relevant apologetics. The Overton Window is one such conceptual tool of value in this secular age. The immanent frame appears to imprison the vision of secular societies within a compressed horizon; apologetics is concerned with changes of understanding, yet to change a social imaginary might seem like changing the colour of the sky or relocating the horizon. If social imaginaries are more mosaics than monoliths, however, and multifarious Overton Windows open out from the different pieces which make up those mosaics, then the transcendent re-enchantment of micro-climates within an over-

[40] See <https://www.wordonfire.org>, <https://www.alpha.org>, and <https://www.christianityexplored.org> (accessed 6 May, 2021).

[41] Alister E. McGrath, *Re-imagining Nature: the promise of a Christian natural theology* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), p. 143. See also Alister E. McGrath, *The Open Secret: a new vision for natural theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).

[42] Taylor describes 'the immanent frame' thus: 'we come to understand our lives as taking place within a self-sufficient immanent order'. Taylor, *Secular Age*, p. 543.

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all secular horizon may be more achievable than much contemporary commentary might suggest.

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