

APOLOGETICS WITHOUT APOLOGY

Andy Bannister, director and lead apologist for Ravi Zacharias International Ministries Canada, offers a way forward for every Canadian Christian to talk about their faith – without apology

Speakers' Corner in London, England's Hyde Park is known as the world centre of free speech. Every Sunday, dozens of speakers perch precariously on soapboxes or stepladders to proclaim their views. It's a place to encounter people of all beliefs and none – and it was there I had my first proper conversation with a Muslim.

Ibrahim was, as the saying goes, loaded for bear. "You're a Christian?" he began. Without

pausing for breath he launched into a laundry list of objections to Christianity, beginning with the Trinity, taking in the Crusades, and then landing on the reliability of the Bible. “Your Scriptures have been corrupted! Only the Qur’an has been perfectly preserved and is the true word of God! Allahu Akbar!”

I went home with my head spinning, with no idea how to answer Ibrahim’s questions. I’d never met somebody with such passionate objections to my faith. Nothing in my ten years as a Christian had prepared me.

But I knew there had to be answers.

The journey to finding them, which began that rainy afternoon at Speaker’s Corner in 1997, led eventually to full-time theological education, a PhD in Islamic studies,

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hundreds of conversations with people like Ibrahim, and full-time ministry with Ravi Zacharias International Ministries (RZIM). First launched 30 years ago in Canada, RZIM is committed to evangelism undergirded by apologetics as we seek to engage the thinking skeptic.

THE DREADED E AND A WORDS

Evangelism and apologetics rank high on the list of what makes Christians nervous. There’s a growing anxiety that evangelism isn’t possible in secular, pluralistic Canada (or only if we carefully disguise it so that our non-Christian friend doesn’t realize what we’re doing until it’s too late). If people have even heard of apologetics (that branch of Christian theology concerned with giving reasons



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why Christians believe what they do), they often perceive it to be about dry, dusty arguments in ivory towers, or about trying to argue people into the Christian faith.

This is a tragedy.

We live in a cultural moment when the need for apologetics – and a fresh vision and passion for evangelism – is greater than ever. Here you will find a primer for apologetics – why it is needed and what I have learned works in today’s Canada.

ARROGANCE AND CERTAINTY

There is only one good reason to be Christian, and that’s if the gospel is true. And if it’s true, then presumably you can give reasons *why*. But we live in an age where many people fear truth, especially truth with a capital T. Last year, I interviewed the Unitarian Universalist chaplain of a leading university for a documentary. He stressed, again and again, that certainty led to arrogance. This was his basic problem with Christians, especially the evangelical variety. “If I ever find myself more than 60 per cent certain of anything,” Jeff said, “I begin to worry.”

The fear of appearing arrogant, intolerant or narrow-minded has

crept into the Church. One of the most common questions I hear from Christians, especially university students, is, “How can I talk about the uniqueness of Jesus without looking like a bigot?”

It fascinates me that in all my years of dialoguing with Muslims, I have never been accused of arrogance. I have been told I am wrong and misguided. I have had many passionate discussions with people like Ibrahim. But never – not once – has a Muslim told me I am narrow-minded for my insistence that it is through Jesus, not Muhammad, that salvation is to be found.

A friend of mine passionately debated with a Muslim at Speakers’ Corner. An elderly atheist gentleman wandered up to them and said, “You religious people. Always arguing!” The Muslim stopped, mid-flow, put his arm round my friend and replied, “This man and I believe in God. You do not. This man and I believe in prophets. You do not. This man and I believe in miracles. You do not. This man is my friend. You are not. Now go away.”

Befriending and talking with those who follow other religions actually helps us see the uniqueness of Christianity. The widespread

idea in our culture that the major religions of the world are fundamentally the same, with just superficial differences, is not true. It is the differences, in fact, that are fundamental. If we ignore the differences, we ignore the person. There’d be nothing to learn if they’re just a carbon copy of me. If what they believe is *different*, then I need to get to know them.

THE OPPORTUNITY DISAGREEING BRINGS

Everybody makes truth claims: Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, athe-

Five common **FAITH CHALLENGES** and how you can answer them

THEY SAY: “Science has disproven God.”

YOU ASK: “What would you say are some of the things that science can’t tell us?”

Things to think about

Science has limits. There are a whole range of questions it can’t answer, from philosophy to math, politics to literature to, most profoundly, what it means to be human. Science is simply one tool for investigating reality. The problem is that to a man with a hammer, everything often looks like a nail.

Further reading

John Lennox, *God’s Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* (Lion UK, 2009)

THEY SAY: “Religion poisons everything.”

YOU ASK: “What about the chaos you can’t pin on religion?”

Things to think about

Human beings have an uncanny ability to take a whole range of things – science, politics, economics, sexuality, technology (and, yes, religion) – and use them for great evil. Rather than blame the things themselves, perhaps the problem lies within us.

Further reading

Douglas Wilson, *God Is. How Christianity Explains Everything* (American Vision, 2008)

THEY SAY: “If there is a God, why is there evil?”

YOU ASK: “What do you mean by words like ‘good’ and ‘evil’?”

Things to think about

If there is no God, terms like ‘good’ and ‘evil’ really just collapse to personal preference. The atheist can say, “I don’t like murder,” but not “Murder is wrong.” Instinctively, most of us recognize evil when we see it. And when we experience evil, what we want is not something said about evil, but something done. And that’s what the cross is all about.

Further reading

Ravi Zacharias and Vince Vitale, *Why Suffering? Finding Meaning and Comfort When Life Doesn’t Make Sense* (FaithWords, 2014)

THEY SAY: “Christians are narrow-minded and judgmental!”

YOU ASK: “Tell me your story. What happened?”

Things to think about

Behind many people’s rejection of the gospel is often not an intellectual objection, but bad experiences with the Church or Christians. We need to take the time to listen, understand and then show a different side to Christianity. Behind every question is a questioner, and unless we remember that, we’ll end up obsessed with winning arguments and lose the person in the process.

Further reading

Ravi Zacharias, *Has Christianity Failed You?* (Zondervan, 2010)

THEY SAY: “You’re only a Christian because your parents were!”

YOU ASK: “So what about an atheist whose parents were atheists?”

Things to think about

Many objections to Christianity self-destruct when you turn them around and shoot them back at the questioner. If what we believe is determined purely by our culture or upbringing, then everybody (not just Christians) is in the same boat. Nobody can claim to believe for rational reasons. And, of course, it wouldn’t explain conversion.

Further reading

Abdu Murray, *Grand Central Question: Answering the Critical Concerns of the Major Worldviews* (IVP Books, 2014)

—ANDY BANNISTER

ists – everybody. My atheist friends are increasingly confident about putting their truth claims out for all to see, whether it's bestselling books from atheist authors like Richard Dawkins, snarky remarks by atheist chat show hosts or secular advertisements on the sides of buses.

We live in a world in which Christianity is under fire from all directions. But this is a tremendous opportunity. The gospel stands up powerfully in the marketplace of ideas. And the more people are aware of some of the competing worldviews on offer, the easier it is to show people that ideas really matter. There is no such thing as neutrality.

I received an email from a student at the University of Toronto. He asked whether I could meet him for lunch and answer some questions about Christianity. John fired dozens of objections at me for a couple of hours. I'd deal with one, he'd shoot another. At the end of our time I racked my brains, trying to think of something I could leave him with. As he opened the door of his car, I said, "I've enjoyed our lunch and I hope some of my answers helped you. But more than that, I hope you felt that I treated you with respect and

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dignity, despite our profound disagreements."

He told me I had been kind. I thanked him for his courtesy as well, despite his clear difficulties with Christianity. And I knew I had found the thought to leave him with. This is what I said. "The reason I have treated you with respect is I believe that as a human being, you are made in the image of a God who created you and loves you, and

who showed how much He values you by sending His Son, Jesus, to die for you. That's why I treated you the way I did. Now, I know that you do not believe this. In fact, you have told me three times in the last two hours that you believe humans are nothing more than atoms and particles, that we are just an accident of biology. But you have not treated me as an accident. You have treated me as person of value and significance. In other words, you have treated me on the basis of my worldview, not yours. For this I am grateful, but it raises some questions, wouldn't you say?"

SPIRITUAL – BUT NOT RELIGIOUS – CAN BE GOOD NEWS

It's one thing to engage with atheist or Muslim friends, but what of the people who describe themselves as spiritual, but want nothing to do with organized religion? A friend and I sat in Tim Hortons when a man saw my Bible. He piped up and told us he was a reincarnation of Jesus' brother James – and invited us to a conference to discover our inner divinity.

Spirituality seems to be everywhere. My colleague Ravi Zacharias spoke at McGill University. We were warned not to expect a huge audience. This was, after all, secular Montreal. Almost 900 people turned up. Even the overflow had an overflow! The organizers had chosen a great title for the event – "Does Spirituality Matter?"

How do we engage this kind of vague spirituality, one that is dogma- and commitment-free? Paul in Acts 17 offers a lesson. Rather than condemn the Athenians for their cunningly-catch-all altar to the unknown god, Paul uses it as a leaping-off point to the gospel.

Lying behind the trend toward a do-it-yourself spirituality in our

culture is the same nervousness about truth that we saw earlier, a sense that organized religion is too straight lined, too dogmatic and too moralistic.

But to people like my friend in Tim Hortons, who believe spirituality is about the right *experience* or *feeling*, I like to ask, "What about those who haven't had that feeling?" The very attempt to be inclusive and nondogmatic ends up exclusive. If you haven't felt what I've felt, if you haven't learned what I've learned, or, in the case of my Muslim friend, kept the commands that I've kept, then you're inferior.

Jesus, by contrast, is the great leveller. At its heart the gospel isn't about what you've done, learned or experienced. It is about transformation, as Jesus pointed out to Nicodemus. In a culture in which post-moderns are so desperately trying to find themselves, this is a message that can powerfully connect.

THE FOUR PRINCIPLES WE ALL NEED TO KNOW

At its heart, apologetics is beautifully simple and intricately connected to the heart of the gospel. As I've wrestled with people's questions, I've learned there are a number of basic principles that apply time and again, no matter who I'm talking with.

1. Know what you believe. This is a challenge for those of us raised in the Church, or who have been Christians for decades. Too often we give how-shaped answers to why-shaped questions. If somebody asks you *why* you are a Christian, giving a narrative of how you became one isn't always helpful. Many of our friends want to know *why* you're a Christian *now*, today, with all of the challenges to your faith that daily attack you. What's your elevator speech for Christianity?

Now that you know you can do it, here's how you can **GO DEEPER** into apologetics

RZIM SUMMER SCHOOL 2015: Learn from Ravi Zacharias, Andy Bannister and a galaxy of other speakers from June 28 to July 3. This year's theme is Reduced or Redeemed? What Does It Mean to Be Human? – a hugely important question that affects every area of culture and how we do evangelism in 21st-century Canada. www.rzimsummerschool.ca

BURNING QUESTIONS: A six-part TV documentary exploring the big questions of life (from the existence of God, to faith and science, to the problem of evil). It aired on Canadian TV last year and the DVD is now available. Also grab the free study guide designed for churches and small groups. www.burningquestions.ca

SHORT ANSWERS TO BIG QUESTIONS: A new 50-part series of videos offering quick answers to a wide variety of questions about the Christian faith. Presented by RZIM's Andy Bannister and Nathan Betts. www.rzim.org

IDEAS FOR EVANGELISTIC EVENTS: Is your church or organization struggling for ideas about how to reach your community? Check out RZIM's list of ideas at www.stayintheconversation.org/rzimcanada/ideas-for-evangelistic-events

READING RESOURCES: If you're a reader and want to go deeper, check out Ravi Zacharias' and Vince Vitale's latest *Why Suffering? Finding Meaning and Comfort When Life Doesn't Make Sense* (FaithWords, 2014); Nabeel Qureshi's story of his journey from Muslim missionary to Christian evangelist, *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus* (Zondervan, 2014), or look out for Andy Bannister's *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist: Or the Dreadful Consequences of Bad Arguments*, a new popular-level and funny (yes, apologetics and humour) book on skepticism coming this fall (Monarch Books, 2015).

2. Rediscover the power of questions.

We've tried to reduce evangelism to formulas or methodologies. But the most powerful form of sharing the gospel is talking to people. Learn to ask your friends what they believe (or don't believe). If a colleague at work is a Muslim, try saying, "I've never really talked to a Muslim before. What do you believe?" Or if a friend self-describes as an atheist, respond, " 'Atheist' tells me what you *don't* believe. But what *do* you believe?"

3. Engage people's honest questions.

Don't ignore objections. A few

months ago I met Alex, a young university student, who introduced himself to me as an agnostic. "I used to be a Christian," he explained, "but I was raised in a fundamentalist family." Questions about religion were forbidden in his family and church. Alex began to read atheist books and eventually abandoned his faith.

"But you introduced yourself as an 'agnostic,'" I said gently. "What happened?" Alex explained he attended a local atheist group, and discovered that they were, in his words, "fundamentalists too." Questioning was not allowed there

either. Alex told me he didn't know what to believe or disbelieve anymore. Then, he asked me if I thought he was lazy. I replied, "There are two types of agnostics. A lazy agnostic is somebody who can't be bothered to find the answer to the God question. An *active* ag-

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nostic is genuinely searching for the answer, but just hasn't found it yet." We talked long into the evening and slowly began to deal with some of the questions Alex had buried for so long.

4. Finally, we need to know what the gospel really is.

That sounds obvious, doesn't it? A good deal of our problems in the Church stem from forgetting. We've allowed the gospel to get tangled up with political positions, culture wars or moralism. As an atheist friend once put it to me, "I know what you Christians are *against*, but I have no idea what you're *for*." A brilliant, if tragic, observation.

CLEARING THE GROUND

Ultimately, the task of apologetics is largely one of debris clearing – removing the obstacles so people can see Jesus clearly. Arguments can't bring somebody to faith, but they can help create a climate in which faith is possible. Ultimately, what people need is not a clever argument, but to see the greatness and attractiveness of Jesus. Our task, and the task of apologetics, is simply to present Him as clearly as we can. And then get out of the way. /FT



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