



# Truth enfleshed

## An apologia for embodied presence in the midst of persecution in India

*Jose Philip and Godfrey Harold<sup>1</sup>*

### Abstract

Apologetics, in general, is commonly known as the logical establishment of the truthfulness of the Christian faith. The approach taken towards apologetics involves a combination of various methods and a conversational style, while still emphasizing the importance of reason, rational inference, and consensus as the objectives of this apologetic engagement. The authors acknowledge the limitations of the Western approach to apologetics, which solely focuses on propositional truth. This article aims to find ways to accurately represent Jesus in the Global South, with a specific focus on India. The intention is to develop an approach that can effectively connect with individuals of different faiths, following the example of Jesus, particularly in situations where the Christian community is a minority and persecution is heightened.

### Keywords

Embodied, love, truth, apologetics, persecution, India.

### 1. Introduction

Apologetics, for the most part, is understood as rationally establishing the veracity of the Christian faith. The approach developed to apologetics is eclectic and conversational, while still privileging reason, rational inference, and agreement as the goals of this apologetic engagement. The authors acknowledge the inadequacies of the Western approach of apologetics, which focuses only on propositional truth. In this article, we seek ways to represent Jesus appropriately in the Global South. We focus on India, intending to develop an approach that relates to people of other faiths in the manner of Jesus, especially in situations where the Christian community is a minority and where persecution is intensified. This article attempts to develop a personal and communal apologetic as embodied

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<sup>1</sup> Jose Philip is a PhD candidate at Asbury Theological Seminary. Email: mailjosephilip@gmail.com. Godfrey Harold is Principal, Cape Town Baptist Seminary and Research Associate, University of Stellenbosch. Email: godfrey@ctbs.org.za. This article uses American English. Article received: 11 Aug 2023; accepted: 16 Nov 2023.

presence – truth in the flesh as a defense of the Christian faith in the face of persecution. Before doing so, we first summarize other common approaches.

### **1.1. *The traditional/classical method***

The traditional method follows a twofold process and is closely associated with prominent figures such as Thomas Aquinas and modern exponents such as William Lane Craig, R.C. Sproul, and Norman Geisler. The initial step involves establishing theism, which asserts the existence of God, through a series of philosophical reasoning. These logical arguments encompass the concept of causation (known as the cosmological argument) and the idea that an infinite chain of moments before the present moment is impossible (the Kalaam cosmological argument). Additionally, the classical approach delves into the intricacies of finely calibrated and precisely designed natural systems, ranging from the intricate order of the cosmos to the delicate balance found within biological mechanisms (the teleological argument). It also addresses the necessity for objective and personal foundations for moral obligations (the moral argument). Once this solid groundwork of theism has been laid and skepticism has been successfully refuted, the classical apologist proceeds to the second stage, which involves incorporating historical arguments that narrow down the various theistic possibilities, ultimately leading to Christianity as the sole viable option. Here, the apologist tackles the challenges posed by religious pluralism, explores the reliability and preservation of biblical texts, and focuses on presenting evidence for the historical resurrection of Jesus Christ.

### **1.2. *The evidentialist approach***

The evidentialist approach is like the classical one in many ways, with little disagreement on the arguments' substance. It is most closely associated with such figures as Josh McDowell, John Warwick Montgomery, and Gary Habermas. For the evidentialist, the suggested two-step approach of the classical method is one step more than necessary. Gary Habermas (2000:92) argues:

Evidentialism may be characterized as the “one-step” approach to this question, in that historical evidence can serve as a species of argument for God. Instead of having to prove God's existence before moving to specific evidences (the “two-step” method), the evidentialist treats one or more historical arguments as being able both to indicate God's existence and activity and to indicate which variety of theism is true.

For the evidentialist, properly presented and supported historical arguments answer the inherent questions that arise in the classicalists' first step. Jesus' res-

urrection can be reasonably demonstrated through historical examination, thus proving miracles are possible. The Bible is reliably passed down to us through the ages, then the truth of Christianity is explicit.

### **1.3. *The cumulative case approach***

Distinct from both methods described above is the cumulative case approach. This method is associated with such figures as Paul Feinberg, C. S. Lewis, G. K. Chesterton, and Douglas Groothuis. Feinberg (2000:151), “Such an argument is rational but does not take the form of a proof or argument for probability in any strict sense of these words.” For this reason, the cumulative case method is a multi-step approach. Logic, history, science, and philosophy all stand on equal ground. According to Feinberg (2000:152), this means that “one may start with any element of the case, and depending on the response, appeal may be made to some other element to support or reinforce the claim that Christianity is true.” Note that the goal here is not to merely argue in favor of a particular Christian belief (such as the existence of God), but rather is a defense of the entire biblical worldview.

### **1.4. *The presuppositional approach***

Several approaches to apologetics have been given the rubric “presuppositional,” including the works of Gordon Clark, Carl F. H. Henry, E. J. Carnell, and Francis Schaeffer. Though there are notable differences in the work of these apologists, they all share a common fundamental principle, namely that the presupposition of the truth of Christianity has maximal explanatory power. Only Christianity explains and accounts for both creation and corruption, answers our longings for truth, good, beauty, and justice, and takes evil seriously.

No strand of presuppositionalism is better known than the approach of Cornelius Van Til. For Van Til, Christianity alone is the key to unlocking human experience. Logic, beauty, the fundamental assumptions underlying modern science, morality, and human dignity are rendered meaningless unless grounded in the biblical worldview of creation-fall-redemption. Van Til believed this was best argued indirectly, not by directly appealing to supposedly neutral evidence but by showing non-Christians that their worldview assumptions destroy meaning itself. This indirect approach leaves Christianity as the last man standing and is the strongest proof of the Christian faith.

## **2. *The Indian context***

The fundamental changes in cultural and intellectual attitudes over recent years, influenced by the decline in confidence in the Enlightenment’s dictum of universal human rationality, have left many questioning the purpose of Christian apologetics.

This is particularly so in the Indian context, where religious diversity runs deep and “many gods, many ways” is a prized mantra. Almost anything can be understood differently and appropriated at will, from its pantheon to its philosophy. However, with growing nationalistic sentiments and the persecution of adherents of minority faiths – especially Muslims and Christians – on the rise, we believe the question is not whether there a place for Christian apologetics in India, but what apologetics is appropriate and how it could be meaningfully practiced. In other words, the time is ripe for a renewed vision and a revitalized practice of Christian apologetics in India.

We argue that biblically informed apologetics offers more than a case for Christ. It offers “truth enfleshed.” As a community that embodies and represents Christ faithfully, believers undertaking the task of apologetics are to present the gospel with gentleness and respect, inviting and nurturing participation. The apologetic of embodied presence guards the gospel against being reduced to a proposition, apologetics against being reduced to mere verbal persuasion, and evangelism against being polarized between proclamation and social action (Harold 2022:253). On the contrary, it nurtures a vision of holistic mission, and inviting message, and a participatory posture, even in the face of persecution and suffering.

In developing an apologetic for embodied presence, we begin with an outline of the history of Christianity in India, highlighting key developments and the contextual and contemporary challenges for apologetics in India in the wake of the rise of Hindu religious nationalism, known as Hindutva. Next, we explore the work of apologetics as presented in the New Testament. Finally, we propose embodied presence – truth in the flesh – as an approach to apologetics that is both biblical in its content and viable in the Indian context. But first, we discuss our methodology.

### **3. *Apoloigia as doing contextual theology for India today***

For the gospel to be meaningfully understood and faithfully lived out, it has to be contextualized (Harold 2022). As Pachuau (2018:91) asks, how else will a people make faith practices distinctly their own while allowing others to do the same? Moreover, contextualization is essential for the gospel revealed in Scripture to take root and bear fruit in cultural soils different from its own, thereby emphasizing the receptor’s context. Therefore, critical reflection on the receptor’s culture; attending to contextual realities, is vital to the work of theology. It helps us to appreciate that God is at work in the world and enables us to participate in his continuing work (Pachuau 2018:94-99; Coe 1973:238-241). Seen in this light, apologetics provides the foundations for contextual theology.<sup>2</sup> It calls for serious reflection on what the gospel is, how the gospel can be meaningfully articulated and accepted,

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2 The goal of apologetics, in our view, is to serve the purposes of evangelism.

and what it means to become a Christian. This undertaking is fully cognizant of Christianity's long history in the country, the changing landscape of Indian politics, the upsurge of Hindu nationalism, the implementation of anti-conversion laws, and the meteoric rise of religious persecution, to mention a few factors.

Doing apologetics in India today (like doing theology) is neither simple nor straightforward. As Bevans (2006:15-16) points out, taking the contextual realities of human experience into account is not just adding an element but "changing the whole equation."

This also provides the first two building blocks of developing an appropriate apologetic for India: the canonical text and the recipient's context. Given the contextual nature of the Christian message and the implications of context on the respondent, Bevans highlights the need to pay close attention to the complexities inherent in contexts at two levels. First, one needs to attend to external factors such as historical events and cultural shifts; second, one must attend to internal factors such as the incarnational nature of Christianity, the sacramental nature of reality, the nature of divine revelation, the catholicity of the church, and the nature of God. Bevans uses six models to categorize the different approaches to contextual theology and plots them along a continuum from experiences of the past to experiences of the present. He warns against adopting any model exclusively as it risks distorting the theological enterprise.

Moreover, Bevans (2006) posits that the main criterion for judging a model's efficacy should be its ability to nurture positive change. This means that Christian apologetics demands more than the defense of a proposition; it calls for an explanation that makes sense to the receptor. In other words, apologetics is contextual theology that is "constructive" (Ezigbo 2021:8-9).

Laurie Green, likewise, urges us to steer clear of the deeply misguided "supra-cultural" expectations of our methods; a problem that plagues most apologetic methods, but which most apologetics seem oblivious to.<sup>3</sup> For any theological task to be transformative, according to Green, it must be theoretically thorough and practically pertinent. By implication, Christian apologetics must seek to deal with real issues of the people being engaged incarnationally, rooted in context, making divine presence manifest in its heart for the marginalized; all this demands meaningful presence and participation in context (Green 2009:17-37). This consideration provides us with the third building block: the community of believers and unbelievers.<sup>4</sup>

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3 Using the quadrilateral of experience, exploration, reflection, and response to do theology in the community, Green seeks to liberate theology from the clutches of a privileged few and put it into the hands of every Christian, transforming it into "an open system of discovery and transformation" (2009:18).

4 At the heart of doing apologetics that is contextually sensitive, as Ezigbo (2021:76) argues, one must "attend properly to the actual context of the community," which is sufficiently addressed only through the rubric of love.

There is one final piece to complete this puzzle: the content. What should make up the content of Christian apologetics in India? Given the contextual and personal nature of the God-human interactions in Christianity – that is, the incarnation – it is important to frame the content of Christian apologetics around the person and work of Jesus Christ, taking great care not to reduce the person of Christ to be just a proposition. This calls for a multi-dimensional understanding of Christology. K. K. Yeo effectively espouses the *Christocentricity* of all things – that is, humans growing into the fullness of Christ. Therefore, there is not just a monolithic (Western) Christology but a multi-dimensional, global view: “While Jesus is singular, Christology is plural” (Green et al. 2020:214, 216-232).<sup>5</sup> This ought to be at the heart of our apologetic endeavor, as Peter exhorts, to exalt “Christ as Lord” (1 Peter 3:15).

These four aspects – Christ, canon, context, and community – form the building blocks of apologetics in India today. With a distinct commitment to the Lordship of Jesus Christ and a firm grasp on the canonical text, it is the privilege and responsibility of the community of believers to engage in contextually appropriate ways, so that those who currently do not believe may know and experience the love of God for them in Jesus Christ and come to place their faith in him. With this purpose in mind, we will consider the fabric of Christianity in India.

#### 4. The history of Christianity in India

Christianity in India lacks a clear, distinct starting point (Hastings 2000:147). Robert Frykenberg observed that Christianity in India can be traced to multiple waves, beginning with an ‘ancient’ wave that is traditionally believed to begin with a visit by the apostle Thomas. Over the first four centuries, Hastings notes influences from Babylonians, Chaldeans, and the Syrian Orthodox Church as well. This was followed (centuries later) by a medieval wave of the Roman Catholic Church in the 15th century, and finally by the modern Protestant wave from the 18th century.

Although Christianity did take root very early in Indian soil, it remained relatively subdued and silent for the first 15 centuries (Frykenberg 2003:36-37). Christianity’s diminutive, non-invasive, and fragile nature over this time period caused Stephen Neill (1990:112) to label its continued presence “a miracle of church history.” Neill reasoned that the Indian church’s distinct language and liturgy preserved it from being amalgamated into Hinduism.

5 Complementing Yeo’s reflections from a Chinese perspective, Mbuvi’s Christology from an African perspective (Green et al. 2020:201-213) and Amos Yong’s (237-250) and Rene Padilla’s (334-352) pneumatologies from Asian and Latin American perspectives emphasize the same pursuit of multi-dimensionality.

Much of this changed with the second and third waves, when (unfortunately) merchants, mercenaries, and missionary influences rechristened Christianity as a foreign and oppressive faith. Frykenberg observes that Christianity in India after the 15th century teetered between systematic exploitation, marginalizing and murdering Indians, on one hand and missionaries working tirelessly to bring them the good news of Jesus Christ on the other hand. However, 20 centuries after Christ's resurrection, India is still less than three percent Christian.<sup>6</sup> The challenge today, however, is not colonial imperialism, but other factors including Hindutva, or fundamentalist Hindu nationalism.

## 5. The birth of a nation

Several ideologies were at play as India began to find its feet as a sovereign nation. As S.M. Michael (2003:3) argues, India's national consciousness "found its earliest expressions not in the realm of politics but in social and religious reform movements, with the search for an appropriate cultural foundation for Indian society." Michael further notes that three visions of how India ought to be developed vied for supremacy as the nation sought its identity: (1) Western ideals cradled in the Enlightenment, (2) ancient Hindu traditions, and (3) aspirations of the oppressed and marginalized. The coalescing of these three visions, through multiple iterations, resulted in the framing of the Indian Constitution, which granted, guaranteed, and guarded India's cultural, religious and ethnic plurality (Michael 2003:3-4).<sup>7</sup>

Christophe Jaffrelot argues that the framing of the Indian subcontinent as a secular nation with multiple identities – including linguistic, caste, and religious identities as part of its national fabric – was largely due to the influence of the Indian National Congress (INC). "For the founders of Congress," Jaffrelot argued, "the Indian nation was to be defined according to the territorial criterion, not on the basis of cultural features: it encompassed all those who happened to live within the borders of British India" (2007:4). While the INC had many credible leaders, none were as charismatic as M.K. Mahatma Gandhi and his spiritual son and political heir, Jawaharlal Nehru.

The INC's vision for nationhood was significantly influenced by both Mahatma Gandhi's universalist definition of the Indian nation and Nehru's secular, individualistic, view. Gandhi "looked at the Indian nation as, ideally, a harmonious collection of religious communities all placed on an equal footing. He promoted

6 The Pew Research Center indicates that "Christians have made up between 2% and 3% of India's population in every census since 1951." Stephanie Kramer, "Religious Composition of India," 21 September 2021. Available at: <https://pewrsr.ch/46oGPoB>.

7 The cradle that nurtured Indian identity, unlike Pakistan which chose nationhood based on a singular religious (Muslim) identity, was territorial.

a syncretic and spiritual brand of the Hindu religion in which all creeds were bound to merge, or converge,” and Nehru believed that “the construction of the Indian nation could only be rooted in secular, individual identities” (Jaffrelot 2007:4-5). This vision, Gyanendra Pandey argues, was squarely rejected by Hindu nationalists (Pandey 1990). After seven decades of being the world’s largest democracy and a secular state, it appears as though the country is leaning increasingly towards Hindu nationalism.

## 6. India at 70 and beyond: The ascent of Hindu nationalism and Hindutva

The clearest articulation of what Hindu nationalism entailed can be found in Savarkar’s *Essentials of Hindutva*. In this booklet, published in 1923, Savarkar argues why India must get rid of everything foreign and return to ‘pure’ Hinduism. It was the duty of every true Indian, he insisted, to engage in this quest to purify India and make it a Hindu nation. While originally Hindutva was used (as early as the 1890s) by social reformers such as Chandranath Basu and Bal Gangadhar Tilak to articulate a cultural vision of Hinduism, Savarkar reframed it to delineate a political ideology in his famous work *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* (1923). Savarkar envisioned India as built on the threefold assertion of a common nation (*rashtra*), a common race (*jati*), and a common civilization or culture (*Sanskriti*) (Mathew 1999:163-192).

Savarkar disagreed with the INC’s vision of a secular India and with Gandhi’s approach to freedom. Whereas Gandhi adopted nonviolence as his political strategy, Savarkar espoused overt and deadly violence. While Savarkar’s role in the struggle for India’s independence was no match for Gandhi’s, his influence must not be underestimated. In particular, his influence on Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, founder of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS),<sup>8</sup> and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the current ruling party of India, which is the largest political party in the world.<sup>9</sup>

Although Hindutva is not explicitly a religious party and does not include the ritual or religious tenets in its manifesto, its commitment to secular India is highly contentious, as the political manifestos of the BJP make clear.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, much

8 According to Hedgewar, “The Hindu culture is the life-breath of Hindustan. It is therefore clear that if Hindustan is to be protected, we should first nourish the Hindu culture. If the Hindu culture perishes in Hindustan itself, and if the Hindu society ceases to exist.” The RSS currently has over a million members, and it argues that there can be only one explanation for its exponential growth in secular India: “The emotive response of the millions to the vision of Bharat’s national glory, based on the noblest values constituting the cultural and spiritual legacy of the land and collectively called ‘Dharma.’” RSS Website, <https://bit.ly/3MRAmf5>.

9 The BJP has over 170 million members. The Communist Party of China is the world’s second-largest party with 96 million members (Wade 2022).

10 In its political manifestos (1984) before becoming the ruling party, the BJP argued that the need of the hour was for national integrity, unity, and cohesion. The reestablishment of national consensus around



of Hindutva ideology can be traced back to neo-Hinduism, which, as C.V. Mathew argues, is a missionary religion in its ethos. Neo-Hinduism is “the reinterpreted, modernized and revitalized nationalistic Hinduism” (Mathew 1987:15). Mathew’s thesis was validated in a major survey conducted by the Pew Research Centre in 2020 on religion in India. The survey revealed that a significant majority of BJP voters believed that to be Indian one must be Hindu, speak Hindi, and vote for the BJP.<sup>11</sup> Not surprisingly, there are close ties between the rise of Hindutva and the marginalization of religious minorities in India.

With the triumphalist approach of Hindutva and the Hinduization of India, the rise of anti-minority violence is inevitable. Moreover, the implementation of anti-conversion laws in several states, along with the drive to ‘reconvert’ (*ghar wapsi*) religious minorities back to Hinduism, raises serious questions about the ongoing well-being of Christians and the task of developing Christian apologetics for India.

## 7. Apologetics in the New Testament: Review and reflections

From the time of the apostles, the main task of apologetics has been to present faith in Jesus Christ as reasonable and transformative, despite the suffering it might produce for followers. Our English word ‘apologetics’ is derived from the Greek word *apologia* (noun), which literally means offering a reasonable defense. Apologetics, in that sense, has always been an integral part of the practice of bearing witness to Jesus and is always contextually conditioned.

The New Testament refers to at least three distinct apologetic devices: miracles, fulfilled prophecy, and personal testimony of eyewitness. In this section, we will consider the New Testament’s apologetic thrust in the light of selected passages from Luke’s apologetic work (in both the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts).

F.F. Bruce refers to Luke as the pioneer among Christian apologists, and the book of Acts gives us ‘contextualized’ models for apologetics in various settings, in engaging diverse audiences such as civil authorities, Jews, pagans, philosophers, and skeptics (Bruce 1988:13). Likewise, Joel Green (1997:17) argues that “the genre of Acts suggests Luke’s concern with legitimation and apologetic” that is primarily eschatological, centered on the invitation to participate in God’s project.

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the secular identity of the country, preserving its democracy and constitution, especially in the light of the diverse and inclusive nature of India, was stated as a non-negotiable to pursue the well-being of all. However, in 2019, now that the BJP is in power, the manifesto speaks about its “nation first” policy, the overall economic development of the country, and the preservation and development of Indian (read Hindu) cultural heritage. Conspicuous by its absence was any reference to preserving the secular or diverse nature of India. The manifestos of the BJP are available online: “Party Booklets and Manifestos: Bharatiya Jana Sangh & Bharatiya Janata Party,” available at: <http://library.bjp.org>.

<sup>11</sup> Based on the Pew Research Center’s survey of religion across India, based on nearly 30,000 face-to-face interviews of adults conducted in 17 languages between late 2019 and early 2020 (Sahgal et al. 2021).

Luke's Gospel is the only one accompanied by a sequel (Acts). Moreover, Acts is the only canonical account of the early church, and much of Paul's writings would be devoid of a context if we did not have the book of Acts. Also, Luke is the only Gospel writer to state the purpose of his narrative (Luke 1:1, 4; Acts 1:1-3).<sup>12</sup>

The introduction of Jesus follows a similar pattern. Luke uses context-specific motifs to expose the identity of Jesus. To Mary, a devout Jew from the house of David, Luke notes that the angel Gabriel introduced Jesus as "Son of the Most High" who would sit on David's throne and rule over the house of Jacob forever, and whose kingdom would never end (Luke 1:32-33; cf. 2 Sam 7:6-16). Jesus is introduced as "Christ the Lord" to the shepherds by a host of angels (Luke 2:11b). Simeon, a righteous and devout man, through the Holy Spirit, recognizes Jesus as "the Lord's salvation ... a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for the glory of his people Israel" (2:30-32; cf. Isa 60:1-3). Anna the prophetess proclaims him as the one the Jews were looking forward to for the redemption of Jerusalem. These assertions are reaffirmed in John the Baptist's declaration that in Jesus "all mankind will see God's salvation" (Luke 3:4-6; cf. Isa 40:3-5; 52:10; Ps 98:2, 3). Although both John and Matthew quote from Isaiah 40, Luke alone includes the words "and all humankind will see God's salvation."

It is important to recognize the contextual emphasis in Luke's account. Luke's focus is to announce God's salvation to Jews and Gentiles alike through the person and work of Jesus and the continuing work of the Holy Spirit through the disciples (and, by extension, the church today). These themes can also be found in Mark and Matthew but are presented somewhat differently.<sup>13</sup>

While not as well defined or elaborate as Luke's, the apologetic aim of the rest of the New Testament is beyond doubt. Jesus did not appeal to faith devoid of knowledge. Rather, he persuaded people to believe in him because of the evidence that corroborated his claims.<sup>14</sup> In Mark 2, Jesus demonstrated that he had the power to forgive sin (which the Jews recognized as something only God could

<sup>12</sup> A close reading of Luke's "undertaking" (ἐπιχειρήσαν) reveals that Luke was especially concerned to offer a contextual apology for the completed work of Christ and the continuing work of the Holy Spirit.

<sup>13</sup> If Jesus is a prophet in Luke, he is more of a teacher in Matthew, as this gospel emphasizes fulfilled prophecy as an apologetic for the claims of Christ (see for example Matt 1:2-23; 2:6, 15, 17-18). Matthew and Mark present Jesus' message more in terms of the kingdom of God/heaven, whereas Luke has a more salvific thrust. In Luke, we see Jesus making it known that everything that happened (his life, death and resurrection) was in fulfillment of what was written about him in the Old Testament (Luke 24:44, cf. Ps 2, 16, 22, 69, 72, 110, and 118). For Luke, Jesus's suffering and rising from the dead on the third day were a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy (Luke 24:46b; cf. Isa 2:3), and his preaching repentance and forgiveness of sins from Jerusalem to all nations in his name was also foretold in the Old Testament (Luke 24:47). The disciples would be his witnesses to all these things through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit (Luke 24:48, 49). Isaiah prophesied through the Holy Spirit that some Jews would not accept the gospel of Christ (Acts 28:25; cf. Isa 6:9). God's salvation was sent to the Gentiles, and they would listen (Acts 28:28). The gospel was being preached in Rome without hindrance (Acts 28:31).

<sup>14</sup> For more appeals to objective evidence in the NT, see John 19:31-36; 20:24, 30-31; Acts 1:1-3; 2:32; 3:6-16; 4:8-14-20; 9:3-8; 14:8-14, 20; 17; 22:6-9, 14; 26:12-18, 26; 1 Cor 15:1-8; 2 Pet 1:16.

do) by healing the paralytic of his physical disability, raising questions of who Jesus really is.<sup>15</sup> In Matthew's account of the discussion that ensued following the healing of a demon-oppressed man (Matt 12:23-30), Jesus reasons with unbelieving skeptics to help them see the truth about his identity.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, John affirms that what he writes about is what he had seen (John 1:14). In 1 John 1, he describes what "we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands." He continues, "That which we have seen and heard we also proclaim to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed, our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete" (1 John 1:1-4).

Like the original apostles, other early followers of Jesus likewise commended Jesus to others and sought to persuade others. This is demonstrated in Acts 18:25-28, where we read that Apollos was "instructed in the way of the Lord, and fervent in Spirit" (v. 25) and "powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus" (v. 28). The word διακατηλέγχετο (powerfully refuted) literally means to argue, dispute, or reason. The same word is used in Paul's apologetic and instruction in Acts 17:2-3, 11, 17, 22-31; 18:4, 19; 19:8-9; 26:25; 1 Timothy 6:20.

Apologetics in the New Testament performs the twofold task of commending the truth about Jesus Christ and confirming the continuing work of the Spirit in the world through the church.<sup>17</sup> The New Testament also makes it plain that God is sovereign in making himself known. Apologetics, therefore, is not about arguing or reasoning people into the kingdom of God. The apologist does not shoulder the burden of conviction, but of clear communication. Conviction and conversion are exclusively the work of the Holy Spirit.

Moreover, the very ability to hear, consider, and respond to the Gospel is the gift of God.<sup>18</sup> This does not preclude the use of reason and evidence; on the contrary, it provides the proper place for the use of it. The use of evidence and the appeal to rationality in the New Testament were not intended to undermine the authority of the Scriptures or to undervalue the work of the Spirit. On the contrary, it is because of the authority of the Word that the Christian can argue for the truth (without being argumentative), empowered by the Spirit. The goal of

15 The authority Jesus exercised over nature, disease, demons and even death gave rise to the same question: who is this man? A similar line of argumentation suffuses the Gospel of John (see John 2:18-21; 10:30-33, 37-38; 15:24-25; 20:24-29).

16 In Matthew 12, we see Jesus argue from analogy three times (25-26, 27, 29), appealing to the law of logical inference twice (26, 28-29); exposing the absurdity of their erroneous reasoning (25-26); applying the law of non-contradiction, and upholding the law of the excluded middle (30).

17 To dispel error, one has to defang or dismantle arguments against Christianity (2 Cor 10:3-5; Titus 1:9-11), and to preserve truth we must embody truth in a truthful manner (1 Peter 3:15; Acts 1:3; Luke 24:39; Rom 1:19-20).

18 See: Rom 1:17; 3:10-13; Eph 2:8-10, Acts 17:22-34; 1 Pet 3:15.

Christian apologetics is the glory of the risen Lord Jesus Christ, its resources are the Word and the Spirit, and its reward is the salvation of souls.

### 8. Truth enfolded: An apologia for embodied presence

Dialogue is foundational to engagement in a pluralistic religious environment. It must be conducted based on mutual respect between Christians and non-Christians. While dialogue implies respect, it does not presuppose agreement. This dialogue is most crucial in India today because the socio-cultural-religious context is in flux. With the consolidating of its position and political influence over the past decade, Hindutva is on the ascent and Hinduization of the Indian identity is in full swing. Apologetics in this context, appropriating what Pachau says that contextualization does, must attempt “to relate the gospel to both traditional culture and the changing sociopolitical [context of India]” (Pachau 2018:141-142). Moreover, to develop an apologetic that genuinely engages, adapts to, and appropriates the religio-cultural aspects of India, Tanchanpong’s “context-to-text approach” (Green et al. 2020:69), which calls for a posture in which elements in the receiver or interpreter’s context are held to as “dynamic and modifiable,” and typified by constructive dialogue with Scripture is invaluable. This is especially true given that the discipline of apologetics has hardly had a greater appeal. “We stand at the dawn of the grand age of human apologetics,” observed Os Guinness (2015:15), “and never before in human history have we had the means to engage in the business of relentless self-promotion.” Yet it is hard to miss the signs warning us that apologetics is deemed by many as unnecessary, disadvantageous, or even detrimental to the Christian faith. The grand age of apologetics is not without its troubles.<sup>19</sup> The greater the persuasion to follow Jesus, the louder the dissenting, disillusioned, and disappointed voices disapproving of apologetics.

As noted earlier, the book of Acts shows how the first followers of Jesus were almost always engaged in persuading others to follow Jesus. It should come as no surprise that the history of missions is the story of the lives of “ordinary Christians living lives faithful to Jesus, in tangible ways – as ‘integrated members of their communities’” (Smither 2014, electronic edition:43). Nor should it surprise us that persuading others to follow Jesus, even if it cost them their lives, was the normal Christian life in the early church. That was how they were encouraged and empowered to live.

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<sup>19</sup> The contemporary challenges to apologetics can be attributed in part to what Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* calls “incredulity towards metanarratives,” but are mostly because of why (and how) it is practiced, which in our view is a greater problem. Sean McDowell (2017) highlights four reasons why apologetics has a bad name: (1) apologists often overstate their case; (2) apologists often do not speak with gentleness, love and respect; (3) apologists are often not emotionally healthy; and (4) apologetics is often done in a cold, mechanical and rationalistic manner.

Apologetic discourses in India, then, will have to be dialogical – both with the contemporary context and the ancient text, and among believers and those who are yet to believe in Jesus – if they are to be meaningful and fruitful. This calls for the Christian community in India to embrace a posture of servitude, even in the face of suffering, modelling our defense of Jesus, the Jesus way. The Christian community must embrace a biblical theology of suffering and instill in every believer that suffering is a price to pay to be a witnessing disciple.

Previously, four aspects (Christ, canon, context, and community) were proposed as forming the building blocks of apologetics in India today. We also noted that the work of apologetics in India calls for an unflinching commitment to the Lordship of Jesus Christ and to engaging those who are yet to believe in Jesus with authentic love. Through this oneness, the spiritually lost will come to believe in Christ and his mission (John 17:3). In other words, the church's collective community and the individual Christian's loving engagements in society, using principles from the canonical text based on the patterns of divine-human interaction found in it, are foundational to its apologetic. It sets the stage for the gospel to be meaningfully communicated and for communities to be genuinely transformed as well.

Three implications for apologetics follow: first, the need for a community that is unafraid to love unreservedly, even the undeserving; second, an unflinching resolve and willingness to engage with gentleness and respect; third, a visible demonstration of Jesus' tangible Lordship individually and communally.

The foundation of the gospel is love, so the fountainhead of the gospel must also be love. This is especially so because the Scriptures reveal a God whose love compelled him, through the pain of his participation in human affairs, through his incarnation, to redeem humanity. The Scriptures also call us to follow his example (1 Pet 2:21; Matt 11:28-30; John 20:21; 1 Cor 11:1). The community of believers gives us three of the four building blocks with which to construct an apologetic for India – Christ, canon, and community.

The eight key findings (listed below) about Christians in India from the Pew Research Center's recent study of religion in India provide us with the fourth building block, context.<sup>20</sup> For the purposes of this article, focus will be given to points 1, 4, 5, 6, and 8.

- 1) Among Indians, 0.4 percent of adults are Hindu converts to Christianity.
- 2) There is no clear majority denomination among Indian Christians.

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<sup>20</sup> Although the eight findings in the list are not always true for everyone everywhere in India, they present a good representation of the Indian context and a helpful reference point for our discussion on developing an apologetic that is contextually framed (Sahgal et al. 2021).

- 3) Three-quarters of Indian Christians (76 percent) say religion is very important in their lives, and Indian Christians engage in various traditional beliefs and practices.
- 4) Substantial shares of Indian Christians follow religious practices and beliefs not traditionally associated with Christianity.
- 5) Indian Christians disproportionately identify with lower castes (74 percent), including 57 percent with Scheduled Castes (SC) or Scheduled Tribes (ST).
- 6) Lower-caste Indian Christians are much more likely than upper-caste (also called General Category) Christians to hold both Christian and non-Christian beliefs.
- 7) Overall, Indian Christians are less prone to religious segregation than some other groups.
- 8) Politically, Christians favor the opposing Indian National Congress (INC) over the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

The first finding (that only 0.4 percent of adults are Hindu converts) alerts us to the challenges associated with witnessing to the vast majority of Indians in India. Points 5 and 8 should help us appreciate that the objectives and goals of Hindu nationalism will make it increasingly difficult for Christians in India to be proud Indians and unashamedly Christian at the same time. This is seen in the growing sentiment that Indian and Hindu are synonyms, as well as the growing discrimination meted out against Christians from SCs and STs. Points 4 and 6 reveal that the vast majority of Christians in India still hold beliefs that are at odds with Christian beliefs and practices and that might serve as bridges.

With the rise of Hindu nationalism, a growing number of states enforcing the anti-conversion law, and the steady shift of the Indian identity from secular attitudes toward Hindutva, increased persecution of religious minorities is to be expected.<sup>21</sup> This makes witnessing for Christ in India today more challenging. However, this should not deter Christians from engaging in apologetics; instead, it should help reframe Christian engagement to reflect the biblical response to suffering, which is not to escape suffering, but to learn to suffer well and love well (James 1:2-4; Rom 5:3; Heb 10:36; 2 Pet 1:6).

Apologetics in India, then, will do well, among other things, to first persuade Christians to follow Christ's example and love even those who harm them unjustly – unreservedly, just as God demonstrated his love for us, while we were still sinners, in that Christ died for us (Rom 5:8). The Gospel accounts of Jesus

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<sup>21</sup> Although Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, explicitly stated that Christianity is very much a part of the Indian fabric, with the decline of his secular vision of India and the rise of Hindutva, the populist propagandists will continue to paint a picture of Christianity as a Western faith or, worse, a corrupting, exploitive, destabilizing influence detrimental to the national interest.

are replete with reports of him taking the initiative to reach out and participate in the lives of others, in love.<sup>22</sup> To deal with any predicament with appropriately and adequately, one must be present, and in Jesus, human predicament was met by divine presence. Learning from him, we too must persuade one another to audaciously love each other and the world as Jesus did.

Second, this calls for an apologetics that not only presents a persuasive case for the historical veracity of the resurrection to the unbeliever, but also encourages and empowers the believer in offering a cogent demonstration of “being born again into a living hope” because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:3). Believers should be unafraid of those who persecute them and relentless in doing good to them.

Third, it also calls for an apologetic that nurtures an unflinching resolve and willingness to engage with gentleness and respect. Any apologetics of the Gospel must be done in love, gentleness and respect; failing which we will only sow seeds of discord and reap dissensions. Moreover, through our engagement (in love), we learn to demonstrate the Lordship of Jesus without compromise or coercion, as we seek to be an invitational community that embodies the love of God for the other. In this context, we maintain a posture of servitude to Jesus, which shows the Lordship of Jesus as good, as set before the world the reason for the hope that is in us, for their good.

Communities that embody Christ’s loving, self-giving presence and engage dialogically, making every effort to relate the gospel to Indians who are yet to be Christians, with gentleness and respect, will offer a compelling apologetic for the gospel of Jesus Christ in an Indian context. Such an apologetic will not only rescue apologetics from reducing the person of Jesus Christ to a mere proposition, but it will also present Christ to Indians as with them and for them – truth *enfleshed*.

## 9. Conclusion

Despite 2,000 years of Christianity in India, Christians in India are a struggling minority, with a growing sentiment that they don’t belong. While it is true that the Indian Constitution grants, guarantees, and guards every citizen’s fundamental right to religious freedom, persecution of religious minorities has become commonplace, especially in light of the rise of Hindu nationalism. The present condition is bleak, yet therein lies the opportunity for Christian apologetics.

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<sup>22</sup> The good that Jesus went about doing always came at a cost. Sometimes it was at the expense of a meal (John 4), risking defilement and ostracism, which was a big deal for the Jews (Matt 8). He even risked incurring the wrath of the religious and political leaders of his day so that he could do for humanity what only he could do – that is, to save us from our sin. For that reason, he embraced death on the cross (1 Tim 1:15; Phil 2:8).

Cradled by the cross, the Christian church is no stranger to persecution. History attests that persecution has been an integral part of the growth and spread of Christianity. Persecution, however, does not mean that the church can do nothing about its plight, nor does persecution guarantee growth. Persecution is not only an opportunity to experience the sovereignty of God but also an invitation to participate in God's work in the world.

We have offered an *apologia* for embodied presence – truth in the flesh – as an approach to apologetics that is biblical in its content and viable in the Indian context. As a community that embodies and represents Christ faithfully, the task of apologetics is to commend Christ with gentleness and respect, inviting and nurturing participation. The apologetic of embodied presence guards the gospel from being reduced to a proposition, apologetics from being reduced to persuasion, and evangelism from being polarized between proclamation and social action. On the contrary, it nurtures a vision of mission that is holistic, a message that is invitational, and a posture that is participatory, even in the face of persecution and suffering.

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