

APOLOGETICS



SOUTHWESTERN
JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY

The Forgotten Legacy

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The strength indeed of the Infidel is in our weakness and folly; and it is our groundless fears which make him formidable. For, the truth is, that against the substance of Christianity itself, as distinguished from human perversions of it, modern Infidelity—however it may boast of new discoveries—has nothing more to say, than has been said and refuted a thousand times.

—Richard Whately, *Cautions for the Times*

Tolle lege.

—Augustine, *Confessions*

Even an inquiry into the literature of theology discloses the fact that apologetics is a subject with a long history. But in the contemporary training of seminarians, that history is often presented in a severely truncated form. Because there are some notable early apologies by Justin Martyr, Athenagoras, and Aristides, and because Origen responded to Celsus and Eusebius responded to Porphyry, the casual inquirer is apt to classify the literature of apologetics as a subset of the patristic literature and then to bracket it with a wry mental note: *Remember to turn to this stuff if the Quartodeciman controversy ever flares up again.*

I aim in this essay to counteract that misperception by surveying a few representative works from the history of apologetics that deserve to be rediscovered and indicating some points where they are particularly relevant to contemporary discussions.

To ensure that the list does not merely tantalize, I have restricted myself to works in English, most or all of them readily available online. In an effort to provide something that will be of interest even to scholars, I have deliberately passed over a few great works, such as Butler's *Analogy of Religion*, that receive more than a passing notice in Avery Dulles's *History of Apologetics*.¹ If this overview persuades even a few readers to take up and read some of these forgotten works, it will have done what I intended.

¹ Avery Dulles, *A History of Apologetics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999). Dulles's work, originally published in 1971, is spotty and deeply idiosyncratic. With respect to the Anglophone literature at least, someone needs to start afresh and do the job properly.

Dialogues

The dialogue format, made famous by Plato and employed by early Christian writers such as Justin Martyr, Minucius Felix, Adamantius, and Augustine of Hippo provides a natural medium for the give and take of apologetic argument. Probably the best-known contemporary works of apologetics in this genre are the Socratic dialogues of Peter Kreeft. But the history of apologetics in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries boasts several valuable dialogues that merit rediscovery.

George Berkeley, the Anglican Bishop of Cloyne, is chiefly remembered today for his vigorous defense of a form of idealism in the early 1700s; and as idealism is making a modest comeback in philosophical circles, readers with a strong interest in metaphysics and epistemology are likely to think of him in that connection. But he was also a vigorous apologist writing at the height of the Deist controversy. During an unexpected three-year stay in Rhode Island, where he found himself semi-stranded when the promised financial backing for his project of founding a missionary college in Bermuda fell through, he penned *Alciphron: or, the Minute Philosopher*, a dialogue with four principal characters, two Christian and two skeptical. Of the antagonists, Alciphron, both in his ideas and in his manner, largely represents the deism of the Earl of Shaftesbury and also sometimes retails the arguments of Matthew Tindal; Lysicles, more hardened and less given to rhetorical flourishes, presents many of the arguments of Anthony Collins and Bernard Mandeville.

Because Berkeley ranges over so many of the writings of the deists, his work is an especially useful source to demonstrate how frequently the arguments and techniques of contemporary atheists were anticipated during the deist controversy. Here, for example, from the Sixth Dialogue, is an exchange on the evidence for miracles:

Alc. Miracles, indeed, would prove something. But what proof have we of these miracles?

Cri. Proof of the same kind that we have or can have of any facts done a great way off, and a long time ago. We have authentic accounts transmitted down to us from eye-witnesses, whom we cannot conceive tempted to impose upon us by any human motive whatsoever; inasmuch as they acted therein contrary to their interests, their prejudices, and the very principles in which they had been nursed and educated. These accounts were confirmed by the unparalleled subversion of the city of Jerusalem, and the dispersion of the Jewish nation, which is a standing testimony to the truth of the gospel, particularly of the predictions of our blessed Saviour. These accounts, within less than a century, were spread throughout the world, and believed by great num-

bers of people. These same accounts were committed to writing, translated into several languages, and handed down with the same respect and consent of Christians in the most distant churches.²

Confronted with the sort of evidence we would expect to have if the events had actually taken place more or less as narrated, Alciphron appeals to what we should today call the telephone game argument:

Do you not see, said Alciphron, staring full at Crito, that all this hangs by tradition? And tradition, take my word for it, gives but a weak hold: it is a chain, whereof the first links may be stronger than steel, and yet the last weak as wax, and as brittle as glass. Imagine a picture copied successively by a hundred painters, one from another; how like must the last copy be to the original! How lively and distinct will an image be, after a hundred reflections between two parallel mirrors! Thus like and thus lively do I think a faint vanishing tradition, at the end of sixteen or seventeen hundred years. Some men have a false heart, others a wrong head; and, where both are true, the memory may be treacherous. Hence there is still something added, something omitted, and something varied from the truth: and the sum of many such additions, deductions, and alterations accumulated for several ages do, at the foot of the account, make quite another thing.³

Crito is, however, unimpressed, and he attacks the argument at the point where a long chain of borrowing is supposed to have intervened, invoking the age of Codex Alexandrinus:

Cri. Ancient facts we may know by tradition, oral or written: and this latter we may divide into two kinds, private and public, as writings are kept in the hands of particular men, or recorded in public archives. Now, all these three sorts of tradition, for aught I can see, concur to attest the genuine antiquity of the gospels. And they are strengthened by collateral evidence from rites instituted, festivals observed, and monuments erected by ancient Christians, such as churches, baptisteries, and sepulchres. Now, allowing your objection holds against oral tradition, singly taken, yet I can think it no such difficult thing to transcribe faithfully. And things once committed to writing are secure from slips of memory, and may with common care be preserved entire so long as the manuscript lasts: and this experience shews may be above two thousand years. The Alexandrine manuscript is allowed to

² George Berkeley, *Alciphron*, in A.C. Fraser, ed., *The Works of George Berkeley, D.D.*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1871), 223–24.

³ Berkeley, *Alciphron*, 224.

be above twelve hundred years old; and it is highly probable there were then extant copies four hundred years old. A tradition, therefore, of above sixteen hundred years old need have only two or three links in its chain. And these links, notwithstanding that great length of time, may be very sound and entire. Since no reasonable man will deny, that an ancient manuscript may be of much the same credit now as when it was first written. We have it on good authority, and it seems probable, that the primitive Christians were careful to transcribe copies of the gospels and epistles for their private use; and that other copies were preserved as public records, in the several churches throughout the world; and that portions thereof were constantly read in their assemblies. Can more be said to prove the writings of classic authors, or ancient records of any kind authentic?⁴

Alciphron is out of his depth here, so he resorts to a distinction between arguments that silence and those that convince:

Alciphron, addressing his discourse to Euphranor, said—It is one thing to silence an adversary, and another to convince him. What do you think, Euphranor?

Euph. Doubtless, it is.

Alc. But what I want is to be convinced.

Euph. That point is not so clear.⁵

A bit further on in the same Dialogue, Alciphron complains that the canon of the New Testament was not settled until hundreds of years after the books were written; and “what was uncertain in the primitive times cannot be undoubted in the subsequent.” Euphranor, before answering, asks for some clarification of the argument:

Euph. I should be glad to conceive your meaning clearly before I return an answer. It seems to me this objection of yours supposeth that where a tradition hath been constant and undisputed, such tradition may be admitted as a proof, but that where the tradition is defective, the proof must be so too. Is this your meaning?

Alc. It is.⁶

⁴ Berkeley, *Alciphron*, 224–25.

⁵ Berkeley, *Alciphron*, 225.

⁶ Berkeley, *Alciphron*, 227.

The opposing argument having been stated plainly, Berkeley's protagonist does not undertake to argue for the genuineness of every book of the New Testament but rather reverses the charge, pointing out what such reasoning implies regarding the Gospels and the letters of Paul, which were at that time universally accepted as genuine:

Euph. Consequently the Gospels, and Epistles of St. Paul, which were universally received in the beginning, and never since doubted of by the Church, must, notwithstanding this objection, be in reason admitted for genuine. And, if these books contain, as they really do, all those points that come into controversy between you and me, what need I dispute with you about the authority of some other books of the New Testament, which came later to be generally known and received in the Church? If a man assent to the undisputed books, he is no longer an infidel; though he should not hold the Revelations, or the Epistle of St. James or Jude, or the latter of St. Peter, or the two last of St. John to be canonical. The additional authority of these portions of Holy Scripture may have its weight in particular controversies between Christians, but can add nothing to arguments against an infidel as such. Wherefore, though I believe good reasons may be assigned for receiving these books, yet these reasons seem now beside our purpose. When you are a Christian it will be then time enough to argue this point. And you will be the nearer being so, if the way be shortened by omitting it for the present.⁷

The canny skeptic now shifts his ground to a recognizably modern position and raises the specter of wholesale forgery:

Alc. Not so near neither as you perhaps imagine: for, notwithstanding all the fair and plausible things you may say about tradition, when I consider the spirit of forgery which reigned in the primitive times, and reflect on the several Gospels, Acts, and Epistles, attributed to the apostles, which yet are acknowledged to be spurious, I confess I cannot help suspecting the whole.⁸

But Euphranor charges him with the use of an inconsistent set of standards:

Euph. Tell me, Alciphron, do you suspect all Plato's writings for spurious, because the *Dialogue upon Death*, for instance, is allowed to be so? Or will you admit none of Tully's writings to be genuine, because Sigonius imposed a book of his own writing

⁷ Berkeley, *Alciphron*, 227–28.

⁸ Berkeley, *Alciphron*, 228.

for Tully's treatise *De Consolatione*, and the imposture passed for some time on the world?

Alc. Suppose I admit for the works of Tully and Plato those that commonly pass for such. What then?

Euph. Why then I would fain know whether it be equal and impartial in a free-thinker, to measure the credibility of profane and sacred books by a different rule. Let us know upon what foot we Christians are to argue with minute philosophers; whether we may be allowed the benefit of common maxims in logic and criticism? If we may, be pleased to assign a reason why suppositious writings, which in the style and manner and matter bear visible marks of imposture, and have accordingly been rejected by the Church, can be made an argument against those which have been universally received, and handed down by an unanimous constant tradition. There have been in all ages, and in all great societies of men many capricious, vain, or wicked impostors, who for different ends have abused the world by spurious writings, and created work for critics both in profane and sacred learning. And it would seem as silly to reject the true writings of profane authors for the sake of the spurious, as it would seem unreasonable to suppose, that among the heretics and several sects of Christians there should be none capable of the like imposture.⁹

At this point, Alciphron changes the subject again and begins objecting to divine inspiration.

Writing seventy years after the publication of *Alciphron*, Timothy Dwight calls the work "a store-house, whence many succeeding writers have drawn their materials, and their arguments. . . . The reasoning is clear, sound, and conclusive; and has never been answered." Dwight was in a position to know, for he leaned heavily on the best work of the previous century in his strenuous and largely successful endeavor to combat the rampant infidelity he found when he assumed the presidency of Yale.¹⁰

Berkeley's performance in *Alciphron* garnered praise outside of academic circles. The poet Elizabeth Rowe, in correspondence with the Countess of Hertford in 1732, thanked her friend warmly for sending a copy of the book:

You have given me a real and extensive satisfaction, by the book you sent me. I read it with a secret gratitude to the author, as being a benefactor to mankind, in endeavouring to secure their highest interest; nothing can be writ with more argument and

⁹ Berkeley, *Alciphron*, 228–29.

¹⁰ See Charles Beecher, ed., *Autobiography, Correspondence, etc. of Lyman Beecher, vol. 1* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1864), 43–44.

vivacity, nor more seasonably, in this juncture of apostacy from the Christian religion.¹¹

If there were nothing more of interest in *Alciphron* than a demonstration that the arguments and rhetorical techniques of some popular contemporary atheists have not changed in the intervening three centuries, that would be ground enough for recommending it. But on a closer reading, there is more. Consider this comment by Euphranor, from the Sixth Dialogue, where Alciphron has just waved aside any appeal to the argument from fulfilled prophecy by declining to look into the matter:

Euph. To an extraordinary genius, who sees things with half an eye, I know not what to say. But for the rest of mankind, one would think it very rash in them to conclude, without much and exact inquiry, on the unsafe side of a question which concerns their chief interest.¹²

This light comment contains the seed of an important point that Joseph Butler would develop fully a few years later in *The Analogy of Religion*. The fact that much is at stake for someone who rejects Christianity is presented as a motivation, not to *believe* in it—that would be more along the lines of Pascal's famous wager—but to *inquire* into it carefully. The realization that it *may* be true, and that if it *were* true it would be of overwhelming importance, places a sincere inquirer under certain obligations. Here is a forgotten line of argument that we would do well to recover.

Berkeley's friend and contemporary Thomas Sherlock, the Anglican Bishop of London, had contributed a dialogue of his own to the deist controversy just a few years earlier. His engaging book, titled *The Trial of the Witnesses of Resurrection*, is framed as a friendly debate among some lawyers who were discussing the merits of Thomas Woolston's *Six Discourses on the Miracles of Our Lord*.¹³ Woolston had been convicted and sentenced on a charge of blasphemy for publishing these *Discourses*. Although the clergy were divided regarding the propriety of taking him to court, it was plain enough from the manner in which Woolston wrote that he was trying to cause offense.

Sherlock wastes no time on the subject of Woolston's trial. Instead, he develops an argument between two of the lawyer friends on the question of whether (as Woolston urges) the apostles were guilty of giving false witness in the matter of the resurrection of Jesus. Mr. A, who agrees to take up the

¹¹ See *The Works of Mrs. Elizabeth Rowe*, vol. 4 (London: John & Arthur Arch, 1796), 171. The end of the previous letter identifies the book in question as Berkeley's *Alciphron*.

¹² Berkeley, *Alciphron*, 260.

¹³ Thomas Sherlock, *The Tryal of the Witnesses of the Resurrection*, 4th ed. (London: J. Roberts, 1729). Here and elsewhere I have silently modernized Sherlock's spelling and capitalization, following later editions. Woolston's *Discourses* appeared over the course of several years from 1727–29 and were printed in London for the author.

role of counsel for the prosecution, lays out Woolston's arguments with some vigor, adding certain criticisms derived from the writings of Anthony Collins along the way. Mr. B, as counsel for the defense, addresses each of those arguments and makes the case for the veracity and integrity of the witnesses.

Woolston's arguments, rather like those of popular atheism today, range from the specious to the preposterous, and Mr. B has no difficulty obtaining a verdict of "not guilty" on behalf of the apostles. There is enough substance to the case for the defense to warrant a reading of the work today, particularly on points about the mismatch between Jewish expectations of a messiah and Jesus' actual teaching and actions. Mr. B first quotes a passage on the issue from "a friend of the gentleman's," Anthony Collins:

It must be difficult, if not impossible, to introduce among men (who in all civiliz'd countries are bred up in the belief of some Reveal'd Religion) a Reveal'd Religion wholly new, or such as has no reference to a preceding One: For that would be to combat all men on too many respects, and not to proceed on a sufficient number of principles necessary to be assented to by those on whom the first impressions of a new Religion are propos'd to be made.¹⁴

Sherlock's protagonist then proceeds to turn this point into a serious concession on behalf of Christianity:

You see now the reason of the necessity of this foundation: it is, that the new teacher may have the advantage of old popular opinions, and fix himself on the prejudices of the people. Had Christ any such advantages? or did he seek any such? The people expected a victorious prince; he told them they were mistaken: they held as sacred the traditions of the elders; he told them those traditions made the law of God of none effect: they valued themselves for being the peculiar people of God; he told them, that people from all quarters of the world should be the people of God, and sit down with *Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob*, in the kingdom: they thought God could be worshipped only at *Jerusalem*; he told them God might and should be worshipped every where: they were superstitious in the observance of the Sabbath; he, according to their reckoning, broke it frequently: in a word, their washings of hand and posts, their superstitious distinctions of meats, their prayers in public, their villanies in secret, were all reprov'd, expos'd, and condemn'd by him; and the cry ran strongly against him, that he came to destroy the Law

¹⁴ Anthony Collins, *A Discourse of the Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion* (London: n.p., 1724), 23–24.

and the Prophets. And now, sir, what advantage had Christ, of your common and necessary foundation?¹⁵

But there is more to Sherlock's performance than just a trenchant refutation of perennial objections. Consider this claim from a recent work by the philosopher Robert Fogelin, defending David Hume's argument in "Of Miracles" against criticisms leveled by John Earman and David Johnson:¹⁶

Part 1 [of Hume's essay] invokes the principle that the extreme improbability of an event's occurring itself provides grounds for calling into question the legitimacy of the testimony presented in its behalf. When the occurrence of the event is highly improbable, the standards of scrutiny rise and the challenge becomes correspondingly more forceful. Given this principle, we are *entitled* to apply very high (ultrahigh) standards to the testimony intended to establish the occurrence of a miracle. This is a key move, because it shows that Hume is not simply being arbitrary or prejudiced in insisting that the standards appropriate for evaluating testimony in behalf of miracles are much higher than the standards we normally apply in evaluating testimony.¹⁷

The interesting point is that Sherlock's protagonist had already anticipated this move two decades before Hume's famous essay was published—and responded to it. First, Mr. A presents the criticism in words that afford a startling anticipation of Hume:

[A]lthough in common life we act in a thousand instances upon the faith and credit of human testimony; yet the reason for so doing is not the same in the case before us. In common affairs, where nothing is asserted but what is probable and possible, and according to the usual course of nature, a reasonable degree of evidence ought to determine every man. For the very probability or possibility of the thing is a support to the evidence; and in such cases we have no doubt but a man's senses qualify him to be a witness. But when the thing testified is contrary to the order of nature, and, at first sight at least, impossible, what evidence can be sufficient to overturn the constant evidence of nature, which she gives us in the constant and regular method of her operations? If a man tells me he has been in France, I ought to give a reason for not believing him; but if he tells me he comes

¹⁵ Sherlock, *The Tryal of the Witnesses of the Resurrection*, 25–26.

¹⁶ John Earman, *Hume's Abject Failure* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); David Johnson, *Hume, Holism and Miracles* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1999).

¹⁷ Robert Fogelin, *A Defense of Hume on Miracles* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 30–31.

from the grave, what reason can he give why I should believe him?¹⁸

And then, a few pages further on, Mr. B offers a rejoinder:

A man rising from the grave is an object of sense, and can give the same evidence of his being alive, as any other man in the world can give. So that a resurrection considered only as a fact to be proved by evidence, is a plain case; it requires no greater ability in the witnesses, than that they be able to distinguish between a man dead and a man alive, a point in which I believe every man living thinks himself a judge.

I do allow that this case, and others of like nature, require more evidence to give them credit than ordinary cases do. You may therefore require more evidence in these, than in other cases; but it is absurd to say that such cases admit no evidence, when the things in question are quite manifestly objects of sense.¹⁹

So Fogelin's advocacy notwithstanding, the idea of taking antecedent improbability into account can hardly be considered to be Hume's original contribution to the discussion of reported miracles. It was already circulating before Hume was out of his teens, and the reply Sherlock gives to it has lost nothing of its cogency.

Berkeley and Sherlock are far from the only ones to have written apologetic dialogues. Charles Leslie cast his favorite argument against the deists into a dialogue, and the work was still being reprinted a century after his death.²⁰ Philip Skelton wrote a two-volume survey of the objections of a whole range of deists—Herbert of Cherbury, the Earl of Shaftesbury, Hobbes, Toland, Tindal, Collins, Mandeville, Woolston, Dodwell, Morgan, Chubb, and more—as a dialogue.²¹ Henry Rogers produced an entire novel as a rejoinder to a skeptical book written by Cardinal Newman's brother Francis.²² Henry Huckin reworked Butler's *Analogy of Religion* into dialogue form in order to render the argument clearer and increase its audience.²³ Robert Morehead took up the dialogue form in order to answer the arguments against natural theology that Hume had propounded posthumously

¹⁸ Sherlock, *The Tryal of the Witnesses of the Resurrection*, 58.

¹⁹ Sherlock, *The Tryal of the Witnesses of the Resurrection*, 55.

²⁰ Charles Leslie, *The Truth of Christianity Demonstrated* (London: F.C. & J. Rivington, 1820).

²¹ Philip Skelton, *Deism Revealed*, 2nd ed. (London: A. Millar, 1751).

²² Henry Rogers, *The Eclipse of Faith*, 3rd ed. (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1853). The work is a response to Francis William Newman, *The Phases of Faith* (London: John Chapman, 1850).

²³ Henry Robert Huckin, *The Analogy of Religion* (London: Christian Evidence Committee, 1873).

in his own *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*.²⁴ A Bishop in India who modestly withheld his name wrote a series of dialogues between a Christian and an earnest Hindu who desires to know the grounds of Christian belief.²⁵ Anyone interested in pursuing this vein of the literature of Christian evidences will not lack for material.

Satires

Part of what makes the dialogues of Sherlock and Berkeley worth reading is their willingness to do a bit of rhetorical skewering of their dialectical foes. But some authors have gone a good deal further. The literature of apologetics boasts a number of fine satires that pursue a single idea—usually the application of some set of skeptical ideas to a secular historical topic—with hilarious results.

The best-known apologetic satire is undoubtedly Richard Whately's *Historic Doubts relative to Napoleon Buonaparte*.²⁶ This amusing work, first published in 1819, was provoked by an article in the *Edinburgh Review* praising Hume's essay on miracles as "a work abounding in maxims of great use in the conduct of life."²⁷ Whately sets out, with frequent ironic tips of the hat to Hume, to show just how "useful" they really are. He argues that the exploits attributed to Napoleon Buonaparte are not credible, despite the overwhelming testimony to them, because of their many improbabilities. Rather than believe them to be true, he professes to prefer the hypothesis that Napoleon is a fictional creation of the British government designed to promote national unity and frighten ordinary citizens into paying their taxes. Whately pursues the subject so adroitly that some of his readers actually believed the book to be a serious argument for universal skepticism—a fact that afforded him considerable amusement.

A few examples will give the flavor of his approach better than any mere summary could. Our sources of information regarding the supposed exploits of Napoleon are, Whately argues, mostly hearsay, as most people derive their information on the subject from newspaper reports. But newspapers notoriously copy from one another. (Here Whately subjoins in a footnote a quotation from Laplace regarding the diminution of testimony through a long chain by multiplying probabilities, a favorite argument of contemporary skeptics as well.)

²⁴ Robert Morehead, *Dialogues on Natural and Revealed Religion* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1880).

²⁵ Anonymous, *The Inquiries of Ramchandra* (Calcutta: Oxford Mission, 1882); see especially dialogue XI.

²⁶ Richard Whately, *Historic Doubts Relative to Napoleon Buonaparte*, 11th ed. (Andover: Warren F. Draper, 1874).

²⁷ *Edinburgh Review* 23 (1814): 320–40. The piece, a review of Laplace's *Essai Philosophique sur les Probabilités* (1814), was published anonymously.

Even aside from the worry of copying, newspaper editors

profess to refer to the authority of certain “private correspondents” abroad; *who* these correspondents are, what means *they* have of obtaining information, or whether they exist at all, we have no way of ascertaining.²⁸

The parallel to a popular criticism of the Gospels as sources of information is plain. We do not (allegedly) know who these writers were, we do not know what their sources of information might have been, and aside from all that, who knows what an editor may have done with the original reports he was given?

But Whately is only warming up. The reports we have, whatever their provenance, are wildly contradictory. The discordance and mutual contradictions of these witnesses, he writes, are

such as would alone throw a considerable shade of doubt over their testimony. It is not in minute circumstances alone that the discrepancy appears, such as might be expected to appear in a narrative substantially true; but in very great and leading transactions, and such as are very intimately connected with the supposed hero. For instance, it is by no means agreed whether Buonaparte led in person the celebrated charge over the bridge of Lodi, (for *celebrated* it certainly is, as well as the siege of Troy, whether either event ever really took place or no,) or was safe in the rear, while Augereau performed the exploit. The same doubt hangs over the charge of the French cavalry at Waterloo. . . . In the accounts that are the extant of the battle itself, published by persons professing to have been present, the reader will find that there is a discrepancy of *three or four hours* as to the time when the battle began!—a battle, be it remembered, not fought with javelins and arrows, like those of the ancients, in which one part of a large army might be engaged, whilst a distant portion of the same army knew nothing of it; but a battle commencing (if indeed it were ever fought at all) with the *firing of cannon*, which, would have announced pretty loudly what was going on.²⁹

And beyond such discrepancies between sources, the whole story of Napoleon even from any one source is full of incongruities and implausibilities.

All the events are great, and splendid, and marvellous; great armies,—great victories,—great frosts,—great reverses,—“hair-breadth’ scapes,”—empires subverted in a few days; everything

²⁸ Whately, *Historic Doubts Relative to Napoleon Buonaparte*, 13–14.

²⁹ Whately, *Historic Doubts Relative to Napoleon Buonaparte*, 16–17.

happened in defiance of political calculations, and in opposition to the *experience* of past times; everything upon that grand scale, so common in epic poetry, so rare in real life; and thus calculated to strike the imagination of the vulgar, and to remind the sober-thinking few of the Arabian Nights. Every event, too, has that *roundness* and completeness which is so characteristic of fiction; nothing is done by halves; we have *complete* victories,—*total* overthrows, *entire* subversion of empires,—*perfect* reestablishments of them,—crowded upon us in rapid succession. To enumerate the improbabilities of each of the several parts of this history, would fill volumes; but they are so fresh in every one's memory, that there is no need of such a detail. Let any judicious man, not ignorant of history and of human nature, revolve them in his mind, and consider how far they are conformable to experience, our best and only sure guide.³⁰

In a fine twist toward the end of his satire, Whately draws the reader's attention to the peculiar focus on one *nationality* in the legend of Napoleon.

Buonaparte prevailed over all the hostile States in turn, *except England*; in the zenith of his power, his fleets were swept from the sea, *by England*; his troops always defeat an equal, and frequently even a superior number of those of any other nation, *except the English*; and with them it is just the reverse; twice, and twice only, he is personally engaged against an *English commander*, and both times he is totally defeated—at Acre, and at Waterloo; and to crown all, *England* finally crushes this tremendous power, which had so long kept the continent in subjection or in alarm, and to the *English* he surrenders himself prisoner! Thoroughly national, to be sure! It *may* be all very true; but I would only ask, *if* a story *had* been fabricated for the express purpose of amusing the English nation, could it have been contrived more ingeniously? It would do admirably for an epic poem; and, indeed, bears a considerable resemblance to the Iliad and the Æneid; in which Achilles and the Greeks, Æneas and the Trojans (the ancestors of the Romans), are so studiously held up to admiration.³¹

This passage is amusing enough, but the best part comes in a footnote in which Whately quotes from the second part of Hume's essay "Of Miracles": "The wise lend a very academic faith to every report which favours the passion of the reporter, whether it magnifies his *country*, his family, or himself." So much for the credibility of *English* sources on this subject!

³⁰ Whately, *Historic Doubts Relative to Napoleon Buonaparte*, 23.

³¹ Whately, *Historic Doubts Relative to Napoleon Buonaparte*, 32.

Whately's *jeu d'esprit* ran through fourteen editions in his own lifetime, and his manner of illustrating the folly of Hume's principles inspired other authors to take up the same weapons. On the other side of the Atlantic, Charles Hudson, a minister, statesman, and historian, produced an American satire framed as a discussion of the variations in the accounts of the first battle of the Revolutionary War.³²

Hudson takes on the persona of a religious skeptic who wishes to commend to his Christian readers the principles of Hume's philosophy, and most particularly the principle that "experience is the only sure guide to reasoning concerning matters of fact." Where, then, does that principle lead us when we apply it to the story of the battle of Bunker's Hill and the burning of Charlestown? Most of his readers have seen Charlestown often enough, but they have never seen it in flames. "If we rely upon our own experience," he concludes, "the matter is decided at once; and decided against the commonly received opinion."³³ It is true that there are still alive at the time of writing a few individuals who profess to be eyewitnesses of the events of the 17th of June, 1775.

But what is our experience in relation to human testimony? We know that most men may easily be deceived, and that there are not wanting those who will willingly deceive others. We must bear in mind, that we have the experience of ninety-nine to one against this pretended battle; and that the experience of the ninety-nine is uniform, whereas the experience of the one is variable. The few who profess to have seen the battle, will themselves allow that they have visited this famous spot at other times, and have not beheld anything like what appeared to their vision on that day. Their experience of the battle, therefore, is not only contrary to the experience of others, but contrary to their own experience at all other times.³⁴

Besides this point, the few who claim to be eyewitnesses are by this time "old, superannuated men" whose memories are hardly to be trusted. By such means, Hudson's skeptic attempts to undermine the force of testimony for an historical event that is supposed to have occurred only once.

The witnesses, moreover, are not to be trusted, for they doubtless gained reputation and status, and perhaps also pensions, for their claims to have been at Bunker's Hill on that day. The events to which they bear testimony are improbable—Hudson adduces elementary failures in military strategy on both the American and the British sides—and the testimony itself in some

³² Charles Hudson, *Doubts Concerning the Battle of Bunker's Hill* (Boston and Cambridge: James Munroe and Co., 1857). The work first appeared in the pages of the *Christian Examiner* for March 1846.

³³ Hudson, *Doubts Concerning the Battle of Bunker's Hill*, 11–12.

³⁴ Hudson, *Doubts Concerning the Battle of Bunker's Hill*, 12–13.

respects is flatly contradictory. Even the public monument commemorating the event gives it the lie, for it is erected, not on Bunker's Hill, but on Breed's Hill.

When we take all of these improbabilities and contradictions together, and we recall Hume's dictum that when the event itself is improbable, it requires a greater degree of evidence to sustain it, we are moved to inquire about alternative explanations. Hudson's skeptic suggests that the exigencies of the British occupation of Boston called forth an ingenious Yankee trick:

May we not, therefore, safely infer, that some knowing one, judging rightly of the effect that such a battle would have upon the Colonies generally, invented this story in order to bring aid from abroad, and to show the people that England was determined to reduce them to vassalage by fire and sword?³⁵

After a good deal more of this sort of argument by insinuation and selective invocation of high standards of evidence, Hudson's skeptic proposes a dilemma.

If we follow Hume, we shall unsettle the faith of thousands, and destroy all confidence in history; and if we adhere to the common opinion of the events of June 17th, 1775, we assail the great logician, draw upon ourselves the charge of being credulous, and are justly exposed to the sneers of all unbelievers; . . . Moreover, we shall, in such case, be required to believe not only in the battle of Bunker's Hill, but in other events recorded in history. We shall also be compelled to believe in the events recorded in the Scriptures, and to receive the precepts of Christ and his Apostles, which have always been found to be troublesome . . .³⁶

With that confession, the skeptic's mask of impartiality slips, and he begins to make excuses for not reading the literature of the evidences of Christianity. Nathaniel Lardner's *Credibility*, he explains, is too long, as is William Paley's *Evidences*, and Joseph Butler's *Analogy of Religion* would require "more study and thought than most of us wish to bestow upon that subject."³⁷ Gilbert West's work on the resurrection "is a small book, but exceedingly difficult to answer," George Lyttelton's apologetic study of the conversion of St. Paul "has so perplexed me, that I have resolved never to

³⁵ Hudson, *Doubts Concerning the Battle of Bunker's Hill*, 23.

³⁶ Hudson, *Doubts Concerning the Battle of Bunker's Hill*, 35–36.

³⁷ Hudson, *Doubts Concerning the Battle of Bunker's Hill*, 36. The references are to Nathaniel Lardner, *Credibility of the Gospel History*, 17 vols. (1727–55), collected and published in the first five volumes of Andrew Kippis, ed., *The Works of the Rev. Nathaniel Lardner* (London: Joseph Ogle Robinson, 1829); William Paley, *A View of the Evidences of Christianity*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (London: R. Faulder, 1794); and Joseph Butler, *The Analogy of Religion* (Dublin: J. Jones, 1736).

attempt to read it again,” and even Charles Leslie’s *Short and Easy Method with the Deists* “is far too long and hard for me to answer.”³⁸ It is far simpler to take a “short and easy” method of avoiding these detailed arguments altogether, a method we may find in “the talismanic reply of Mr. Hume—*The experience of the world is against it.*”³⁹

Where Whately and Hudson direct their fire against the skeptical principles of David Hume, Oliver Price Buel targets an outgrowth of that skepticism in the form of German biblical criticism of the late 19th century.⁴⁰ In particular, Buel fixes his sights on T.H. Huxley, the noted British comparative anatomist, who retailed the arguments of David Friedrich Strauss and of the Tübingen school of Biblical Criticism in various journal articles. Huxley, who coined the word “agnosticism” to describe his own position toward the existence of God, had a sharp pen, and his sardonic wit and scientific credentials carried rhetorical weight even when he was writing well outside the field of his own professional expertise. A collection of his articles originally published in *The Nineteenth Century* is the focus of Buel’s satire.⁴¹

Unlike Whately and Hudson, who adopted a narrative voice of one contemporary with their readers, Buel’s persona is a skeptic from the thirty-seventh century. Looking back on the history of the American Civil War from a distance of eighteen centuries, he professes surprise at the fact that there are still people in his own time who take the narratives of that era more or less at face value. How can they have forgotten the lessons of the great German theologians, who taught the methods for dissolving all historical records into a shapeless puddle of doubt? And so the skeptic stakes out his contrary claim:

[C]ritics of the thirty-seventh century are better qualified to pass upon the truth of the popular story of Abraham Lincoln, and the authenticity, competency, and credibility of such narratives as Greeley’s “American Conflict” and Grant’s “Personal Memoirs,” than were those living in the twentieth or in the latter part of the nineteenth century.⁴²

³⁸ Hudson, *Doubts Concerning the Battle of Bunker’s Hill*, 36-37. Here the references are to Gilbert West, *Observations on the History and Evidences of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ*, 4th ed. (London: R. Dodsley, 1749); George Lyttleton, *Observations on the Conversion and Apostleship of St. Paul* (London: R. Dodsley, 1747); and Charles Leslie, *A Short and Easie Method with the Deists*, 8th ed. (London: J. Applebee, 1723).

³⁹ Hudson, *Doubts Concerning the Battle of Bunker’s Hill*, 37.

⁴⁰ Oliver Price Buel, *The Abraham Lincoln Myth* (New York: The Mascot Publishing Co., 1894). The first installment of this satire originally appeared in *The Catholic World* 58 (November, 1893): 254-63. The second installment (December, 1893) is attributed to “Bocardo Bramantip, Huxleyan Professor of Dialectics in the University of Congo” and purports to be reprinted from “The Thirty-seventh Century Magazine, April, A.D. 3663.”

⁴¹ Thomas Henry Huxley, *Essays Upon Some Controverted Questions* (New York: D. Appleton, 1892).

⁴² Buel, *The Abraham Lincoln Myth*, 27.

About the marvelous stories that have grown up around Abraham Lincoln, Buel's skeptic says that they are nothing more than the outgrowth of the sort of hero worship we see in the tales of Robin Hood, King Arthur, and Don Quixote. Of such stories he says, quoting Huxley on miracles, "If one is false all may be false."⁴³ In an age of dispassionate criticism and scientific thought, we no longer give credit to tales that are in any way exceptional. Our own present experience is the measure of all that we may accept in the records of the past; and if, in the thirty-seventh century, we see nothing of a career like that of Abraham Lincoln, then we may justly conclude that it is improbable and incredible that it occurred in the nineteenth. For that is the principle by which "our agnostic predecessors in the nineteenth century made short work of the Gospels."⁴⁴

But Buel's futuristic freethinker reserves his most vigorous attack for the alleged Emancipation Proclamation, and he marshals six lines of argument designed to discredit the story that any such document ever existed. First, the autograph of that hypothetical document has disappeared, and the oldest copies available to our thirty-seventh century historian are from between three and six centuries after the fact. In such an interval, he says (quoting Huxley), "there is no telling what additions and alterations and interpolations may have been made."⁴⁵

Second, the *groundwork* (Buel's skeptic borrows the term from Huxley, who uses it in his description of the four Gospels) for the story of the Emancipation Proclamation consists mainly in newspaper accounts of the day, and such accounts—*quelle horreur!*—were *anonymous*.⁴⁶ Thus Buel tips his hat to Whately's earlier satire while skewering Huxley.

Third, the story of the Emancipation Proclamation "is wholly irreconcilable with the Constitution of the United States."⁴⁷ Article 10 of the Constitution reserves to the states or the people any powers not specifically enumerated; and the power to emancipate slaves is nowhere to be found within the Constitution. Lincoln himself, barely four months before he supposedly issued that proclamation, said that his object was to save the Union "under the Constitution," and it is therefore clear that so principled a man as Lincoln is supposed to have been could not have proposed to do what he is supposed to have done.⁴⁸

Fourth, the Thirteenth Amendment, ratified in 1865, explicitly frees the slaves. But if there had been an Emancipation Proclamation, what need or purpose could such an amendment have served? To the response that the

⁴³ Buel, *The Abraham Lincoln Myth*, 29–30, quoting Huxley, *Essays Upon Some Controverted Questions*, 374.

⁴⁴ Buel, *The Abraham Lincoln Myth*, 32.

⁴⁵ Buel, *The Abraham Lincoln Myth*, 47, quoting Huxley, *Essays Upon Some Controverted Questions*, 265.

⁴⁶ Buel, *The Abraham Lincoln Myth*, 48–49.

⁴⁷ Buel, *The Abraham Lincoln Myth*, 50.

⁴⁸ Buel, *The Abraham Lincoln Myth*, 53, quoting Lincoln's letter to Greeley of August 22, 1862.

Emancipation Proclamation was supposed to have freed only slaves in the Confederate states, Buel's skeptic replies that those were the vast majority of the slaves, and it is hardly credible that the institution could have lived on within the Union more than a year after it had been abolished throughout the Confederacy.

Fifth, there is a weighty argument from silence against the Emancipation Proclamation. For Ulysses Grant, in his two volumes of memoirs, never mentions such a proclamation. How could a Union general and close personal friend of Lincoln, in a work published within a quarter of a century of that event, possibly fail to mention it, had it occurred? His memoirs are comprehensive and detailed, and they treat not only of military matters but also of political history and particularly of the slavery question. It is unthinkable that he could have failed to mention the proclamation, had it been given; and it is equally unthinkable that he could have been unaware of it. Therefore, the Emancipation Proclamation did not happen.

It is true that we have other accounts of the Civil War that *do* mention the proclamation. But if Professor Huxley was entitled to give preference to one Gospel over another, and to treat everything omitted by that Gospel but included in others as fictional, then a thirty-seventh century historian might claim the right to do the same with nineteenth-century documents.⁴⁹

Sixth, there are *discrepancies* in the various narratives of the Civil War. Now in the story of the Gadarene demoniac, the fact that Mark and Luke mention only one possessed man, while Matthew mentions two, is a sufficient ground for Professor Huxley to call the whole thing into question.⁵⁰ Therefore, discrepancies in the stories may be taken equally well to invalidate accounts of events in America in the nineteenth century. Buel's skeptic does pause to quote, with some bafflement, a passage from an eminent authority on the law of evidence:

It has been well remarked by a great observer, that "the usual character of human testimony is substantial truth under circumstantial variety." It so rarely happens that witnesses of the same transaction perfectly and entirely agree in all points connected with it, that an entire and complete coincidence in every particular, so far from strengthening their credit, not unfrequently engenders a suspicion of practice and concert.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Buel, *The Abraham Lincoln Myth*, 61–64. Compare Huxley, *Essays Upon Some Controverted Questions*, 324–35, regarding the omission of the Sermon on the Mount from Mark's Gospel.

⁵⁰ See Huxley, *Essays Upon Some Controverted Questions*, 345–49, and note the emphasis he places on this point on page 347: "The most unabashed of reconcilers can not well say that one man is the same as two, or two as one; . . ."

⁵¹ Buel, *The Abraham Lincoln Myth*, 75. The passage may be found in Thomas Starkie, *A Practical Treatise of the Law of Evidence* (London: J. & W.T. Clarke, 1833), 488, though Buel quotes it from a different edition. The "great observer" Starkie quotes is William Paley, who makes this remark in his *View of the Evidences of Christianity* (op. cit. in note 37), 2:289.

But such a lax view of discrepancies simply will not allow the skeptic to do his job. “It is fortunate for the ‘higher historical criticism,’” Buel’s skeptic observes, “that it knows nothing of legal rules of evidence.”⁵²

I have restricted this discussion of the forgotten apologetic literature to just two genres, and within those genres, I have described only a few illustrative works. But the literature also contains forgotten works of many other types: sermons, lectures, textbooks, correspondence, rejoinders to particular skeptical works, surveys of controversies that spanned more than one generation, novels, poems, and even the libretto to a famous oratorio. Nearly all of these works have lain unread for a century or more, perhaps because contemporary scholars have assumed, as I once did, that they contain nothing but the cold ashes of debates that have burned out long ago. That is a fair characterization of some of them. But others contain insights and arguments like live coals, wanting only a fresh breeze to fan them into open flame. The exploration of our forgotten legacy is just beginning.⁵³

⁵² Buel, *The Abraham Lincoln Myth*, 77.

⁵³ I am grateful to the John Templeton Foundation for support of research that included a detailed study of this literature. An ongoing project of cross-indexing that literature is housed at the Bodleian Library at Oxford University and may be accessed at <http://specialdivineaction.org>.

