A Reason to Believe: How Does the Wesleyan Theological Tradition Contribute to a Contemporary Defence of Christian Faith?

In this paper I want to argue the following:

1. That contemporary Christians – at least in 'the West' face an unprecedented apologetic task in the face of widespread disdain for Christian belief.
2. That while unbelief is widespread, its form, and the nature of its objections to traditional Christianity, varies according to the context.
3. That the particular context in which I am writing – 21st century Ireland – tends to find Christianity incredible for moral and spiritual reasons rather more often than for reasons of rational, scientific fact.
4. That John Wesley, while not strictly-speaking an apologist, gives us a helpful lead in his focus on an evidential understanding of the Christian life.
5. That the Wesleyan tradition, particularly in its theological education in the nineteenth century, has a history of setting out evidence for Christianity, but that it too often fought the apologetic battles of eighteenth century rationalism rather than present something distinctively Methodist.
6. That a contemporary Methodist apologetic would do well to enter dialogue with unbelief by adopting Wesleyan emphasis on evidence drawn from the witness of the Spirit and the evidence of holy living.

In this shortened form of my paper I will elaborate these statements as far as I can; more detail is available in the fuller version. While these 'theses' may imply a settled opinion t the end of a piece of research, they are presented more as a tentative and interim set of opinions. I am more than happy to be instructed by those who respond and directed to further areas of research. To return to my opening statement, It would not be an exaggeration to say that the dominant sentiment in public intellectual life, in the arts and in political and ethical discourse, is that Christian beliefs now only have the status of 'junk bonds'. Hence, as I think about the work of our OIMTS group, I conclude that the most important interface between Christians and others in my own context is the interface with secular unbelief. This is especially so in contemporary Ireland where secularisation has come late, but has now produced a widespread intellectual contempt for traditional Christian belief.

Varieties of Unbelief in Contemporary Ireland

Ireland – both the six counties that are still part of the United Kingdom and the 26 that form the Republic of Ireland – has long-resisted the tide of secularisation. But Ireland (at 10%) is now (according to the WIN Gallup poll) in the 'top ten' of countries with an atheist population. My impression is that the forms of unbelief currently taking hold in Ireland are subtly different from those in – for example – Great Britain. The British debate in the past decade has been dominated by the polemic of the so-called 'New Atheists' (the most prominent being Richard Dawkins) and their increasingly vocal Christian opponents. This Atheism characterises religious belief of any kind as demonstrably mistaken (because it contradicts established scientific fact) and for that reason sees it as always and inevitably corrupting of human identity and flourishing.

In Ireland, on the other hand, the dominant source of unbelief is not so much the failure of religion to match up to the scientific facts of the world, but rather the failure of religion in human life and society. I use three examples to illustrate the way in which resistance to Christian belief is expressed in contemporary Ireland.

The first, 'nostalgic unbelief' is exemplified by the poet Seamus Heaney, arguably Ireland's best-known cultural figure. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature for his poetry and his acceptance speech[1], which defended poetry as a source of truth in a violent world, was widely-praised. Much of Heaney's work is rooted in the Catholic farming community in which he grew up in Co. Derry. But, we understand, "Heaney lost his religious faith as a young man" [2], with art perhaps taking some of the roles formerly occupied by religion While the word of Christian worship are still 'well water, deep down' they no longer point to a set of truth-claims to be affirmed.

My second type, an angry falling out of love with traditional religion, is illustrated by Roisin Ingle who writes a regular column in the *Irish Times.* She shows a strong, principled, objection to organised religion, to (as she sees it) its far-fetched dogmas, its out-dated and hypocritical moral sanctions, its quaint and redundant rituals and its harmful abuses of power. Ingle has renounced her Catholic baptism and urged her non-believing readers to have the courage to register as 'no religion' in the most recent Irish census. In this respect, she is an articulate representative of a growing body of people in Ireland. The religion that has

[1] This can be heard at http://www.nobelprize.org/mediaplayer/index.php?id=1506 or read at http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1995/heaney-speech.html (both accessed 17-6-13).

[2] Sean O'Brian writing in the *Financial Times,* October 15, 2010, http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/4165f3e8-d7e1-11df-b044-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2WThKcBC6, accessed 17-6-13.

dominated Irish culture (for most people that means the Roman Catholic version of Christianity) has, it is argued, been corrosive of human flourishing; its now notorious abuses of power (particularly the sexual abuse of children by priests) have rendered incredible any further attempt to influence the sexual mores of Irish people or to shape opinion on such issues as abortion. Yet this does not necessarily mean an abandonment of any kind of spirituality. There remains a sense of the 'more than material' nature of life, even if it has its source within the self rather than from an external institution. Ingle herself write of this in her column.

Thirdly, with a fuller celebration of unbelief, is the Humanist Association of Ireland[3], with its slogan, 'good without God'. Here is an optimistic picture of human potential; the Enlightenment values of reason, autonomy and choice are the basis for a way of life that is compassionate, dignified and happy. Humanists provide a chaplaincy service to institutions and alternatives to religious ceremonies for the naming of children, marriages and funerals.

This, then, is my own apologetic context. Apologetic contexts are contexts for conversation. There is a place for polemics[4] but I deem that to be a different task from apologetics. Apologetics is more dialogical and seeks to find common ground on which a conversation can take place that enables the Christian to commend his or her faith.

Wesley and Apologetics?

John Wesley was not an apologist in the classical sense of arguing for the truth of Christianity on the shared ground and language of those who denied it. He was an evangelist, but in a context where most of his hearers were baptized Christians who did not doubt the truth claims of the Apostles' Creed so much as fail to integrate them into their lives and experience. Of course, there were plenty of Deists as well as a few open Atheists, and Wesley does take the occasional sideswipe at them. But these are not his chief targets. In, for example, Sermon 130, "On Living Without God", Wesley claims to have known of only twenty genuine Atheists over a period of fifty years. His rhetoric is addressed not to those who are ideological Atheists but rather to those who, in spite of claiming to be Christian, are 'practical Atheists'[5].

That said, Wesley was famously concerned with evidence. The empirical stance he had adopted – in part – from the influence of John Locke, was deeply embedded in his 'experimental divinity'. Yet he made little attempt to use evidence from the wider world in support of Christian claims. Taker, for example, his *Survey of the Wisdom of God in Creation*[6] , a work examined at length by Randy Maddox in *The Cambridge Companion to John Wesley*[7]. While at first sight this work – which is, like so many of Wesley's publications, a 'cut and paste' exercise drawing heavily on the work of others – may seem an apology, Maddox demonstrates that a careful reading and comparison with its contemporaries shows that this is not the case. In fact, Wesley deliberately avoids the evidential apologetics that were becoming popular in the wake of Enlightenment scepticism[8]. Rather, Wesley's intention was to provide a descriptive account of the natural world, believing that such knowledge would confirm believers in their faith.

William Abraham has recently argued that Wesley does in fact have a strong evidential religious epistemology[9]. We know the revelation of God for what it is because our faith is confirmed by the promises of God in the Christian scriptures, by the personal experience of God in the inner life of the believer and by the power of God evident in the lives of those who are 'in Christ'. I think Abraham goes too far in claiming Wesley as a prototype for Plantinga's 'Reformed epistemology'. This would be to over-systematise Wesley. Nevertheless, I will return to Wesley later in the paper and suggest that the evidential value of the assured, sanctified and fruitful Christian life is indeed a rich resource for contemporary apologetics.

Nineteenth Century Methodists and Apologetics

As British and Irish Methodism[10] gained confidence in the nineteenth century, and especially after it began training programmes for its own ministers, we find a rather surprising interest in apologetics – or at least in establishing the evidential basis for

[3] http://humanism.ie/ Accessed 19-6-13)
[4] An excellent example of this genre is provided by David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies*, Yale University Press, 2010.
[5] Albert Outler, ed. *The Works of John Wesley: Volujme 4, Sermons 115-151*, Abingdon, Nashville, 1987.
[6] *A Survey of the Wisdom of God in the Creation: A Compendium of Natural Philosophy in Two Volumes by John Wesley*, http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/a-compendium-of-natural-philosophy/ (accessed 26-6-13).
[7] Randy Maddox, "Wesley's Engagement with the Natural Sciences" in *The Cambridge Companion to John Wesley*, ed Maddox and Vickers, CUP, Cambridge, 2009, pp 160-175
[8] John Ray, *The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of Creation* (1691), http://www.jri.org.uk/ray/wisdom/ (accessed 26-6-13).
[99] William J. Abraham, *Aldersgate and Athens: John Wesley and the Foundations of Christian Belief*, Baker Press, Waco, 2010,
[10] I hope Methodists from other parts of the world will forgive this parochial limitation, but to do otherwise would lead to a much longer – and more ill-informed - paper.

Christian key truth-claims. This process seems to begin with the *Theological Institutes*[11] of Richard Watson, first published in 1823 and dedicated to Jabez Bunting. Subtitled *A View of the Evidences, Doctrines, Morals, and Institutions of Christianity,* these volumes set a pattern for British Methodist theological education for many years. Watson's extensive treatment of the evidence for Christianity is not strictly apologetics in that it is not addressed to the person who has difficulty with religious belief. It is more a matter of reassuring the educated believer that there are good grounds for asserting that the Christian Scriptures are the medium of divine revelation and can therefore be safely trusted as the basis for a systematic study of theology. Of course, what re-assures the believer who is conscious of living in an age of questioning and doubt may also be a resource for dialogue with the doubters.

I cannot give a full account of Watson's system here, but, can only summarise. Note, first, that it is primarily a defence of the means of revelation (Scripture) rather than of the content of revelation. His assumption is that, once having established the reliability of scripture as a source of divine revelation, the remainder of theology is the relatively simple task of unpacking the biblical text. The implication is that revelation itself is essentially propositional in nature, providing us with factual information about the nature and will of God.

Secondly, his defence is (as we would now say) foundationalist. He assumes that he can establish a 'metanarrative' of human history and a universal understanding of morality and truth and that on these foundations an edifice of confident Christian theology can be built.

Thirdly, when Watson contemplates substantial opposition to Christian truth-claims he assumes that the hard work has already been done by others; he is mostly reliant on eighteenth-century apologists such as William Paley and assumes (for example) that Paley has fully and definitively responded to Hume's critique of the concept of miracle. He does not take objections to Christian belief with appropriate seriousness but regards them as symptoms of wilful ignorance and mischief.

The enduring influence of Watson's scheme is emphasised by its reproduction in a fascinating work of the 1830s, John Hannah's *Letter to a Junior Methodist Preacher*[12]. Hannah, theological tutor at the newly-opened Methodist Theological Institute in Hoxton, North London, provides what is essentially an annotated reading list for a young minister who has not had the benefit of a college education. He adopts the headings – more or less – of Watson's *Institutes* (which he describes as having the official sanction of the Wesleyan Conference) and therefore gives considerable attention to acquiring the evidences for the advocacy of Christian revelation. Required reading (in addition to Watson) includes Paley's *Evidences*, Butler's *Analogy*, Chalmers' *Evidence of the Christian Revelation,* Grotius' *On the Truth of the Christian Religion*, and Leslie's *Short and Easy Methods with the Deists* (as extracted by Wesley). This:

> "...will also prepare you, in this age of fearless scepticism and innovation, to detect and expose the manifold artifices which the oppugners of Christianity may contrive; to seize the Proteus of infidelity in all its tortuous shiftings and transformations, and fix it in its proper shape while you approve yourself 'ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you, with meekness and reverence'." [13]

In this way, Watson's approach to the defence of Christianity dominated the first half of the nineteenth century. Although it is heartening to see Methodists doing tough intellectual work and engaging with philosophical argument, there are severe limits to what this approach can achieve. It is essentially defensive in nature; it seeks to rebut doubt and reinforce faith, but it does not attempt to understand the genuine difficulties faced by a growing number of people in respect of traditional Christian belief. These Methodists assumed that arguments from the previous century would do for the fresh challenges of the nineteenth century present. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, this approach does not make use of a distinctive Methodist understanding of evidence. It is focussed on the defence of scripture as the mouthpiece of the Holy Spirit rather than on the evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit in contemporary Christian lives and communities.

Moving forward half a century, we meet another influential Methodist theology, Pope's *Compendium of Christian Theology*[14]. Pope had been a student of Hannah's at Hoxton and succeeded him as tutor at the Wesleyan college in Didsbury, Manchester. His work shows Methodism in a more sophisticated intellectual place. Pope no longer treats evidences as the prolegomena to theological study, but deals with questions of Christian credibility as he goes along. He shows himself to be a moderately conservative theologian, aware of many of the currents of contemporary thought and willing to admit a number of them into the framework of Christian reflection. Thus, cosmological evolution is deemed consistent with the Genesis narrative, though a strict Darwinian account of organic evolution is not. Similarly, non-Christian religions may have aspects that are of Divine origin, but only in so far as they point to the complete revelation that is in Christ.

---

[11] Richard Watson, *Theological Institutes or, a View of the Evidences, Doctrines, Morals and Institutions of Christianity*, London, Wesleyan-Methodist Book-Room. 3vols.

[12] Hannah, J. (1836*). A Letter to a Junior Methodist Preacher, Concerning The General Course and Prosecution of His Studies in Christian Theology*. . London, John Mason.

[13] *Letter to a Junior*, p13.

[14] Pope, W. B. (1880, 2nd ed.*), A Compendium of Christian Theology: Being the Analytical Outlines of a Course of Theological Study, Biblical, Dogmatic, Historical*. London, Wesleyan-Methodist Book-Room.

With Pope we move from a defence of Christianity based on the arguments of eighteenth-century rationalism to one based on a nineteenth-century developmental worldview. There is in Pope – unlike Watson – a genuine attempt to understand, to put himself into the shoes (as it were) of objectors to Christianity. The result, to my mind, is a more effective resource for Christian apologetics because it provides room for listening as well as speech. On the other hand, Pope is careful to avoid such a close identification with those who object to Christianity that he risks distorting the Christian faith by over-adaption to alien world-views. There are some limitations to his approach. In spite of his thorough-going Methodist theology, by following the classical structure of systematic theology, he only arrives at a discussion of Christian experience, holiness and communal life late in the project. By then it is too late for them to form a significant part of his evidential work. Their apologetic value is lost.

None of the work I have discussed is strictly speaking a work of apologetics. It is addressed to believers and deals with apologetic questions as only one of several tasks. Nevertheless, these authors do show nineteenth-century Methodists to be more interested than we might have supposed in the arguments to be advanced for the evidences of Christianity. They deal with them, in my judgement, with mixed success.

The Present Task

It is time to return from the nineteenth century to the present day. Does our Wesleyan tradition have apologetic resources for the situation I described at the beginning of this paper? I believe that it can, though perhaps not entirely along the lines suggested by our nineteenth-century forbears. I want to present a series of suggestions.

1 Methodist Christian apologists need appropriate humility and good listening skills. Just as – *contra* Watson – there was no knock-down argument that could be flung at Hume's attack on miracles, so there is no instant demolition of contemporary unbelief. Pope was much closer to the attitude of critical engagement that is now required of us. It is possible to defend and commend a robust and orthodox Christian faith while respecting those who find it difficult to share it.

2 Methodist Christian apologists need to know make good use of the work of others.
Just as our nineteenth-century forbears were prepared – at least some of the time - to borrow from the apologists of other Christian traditions, so we should use the expertise of others to inform our own witness. If not we are in danger – as was often the case with Watson - of developing arguments based on a very imperfect knowledge of the disciplines we are dealing with.

3 Methodist Christian Apologists need to address the root causes of unbelief. I suspect nineteenth-century Methodist theologians kept attacking the arguments of eighteenth-century unbelief long after they had gone out of fashion. I have suggested that in contemporary Ireland these are not so much the conviction that scientific knowledge has ruled out Christian belief as it is the growing sense that there is a gap between the current experience of life and the teaching and behaviour of the Christian churches.

4 Methodist Christian apologetics, therefore, needs to draw more fully on the particular charisms of the Wesleyan tradition. Karl Barth is said to have remarked that "the best apologetics is good dogmatics". His point was that Christians cannot, as it were, stand outside their faith in order to construct an argument for adopting it. Christianity makes sense from the inside in ways it never can from the point of view of the external observer. That is fair up to a point, though some reason for making the leap of faith surely needs to be advanced. I think a Wesleyan version of Barth's aphorism could be: 'the best apologetics is personal and social holiness.' It is here that, finally, I want to come back to Wesley's own understanding of evidence, particularly the witness of the Spirit. I referred earlier to Abraham's account of 'Wesleyan epistemology' and though I want to resist his formalising of Wesley into philosophical arguments I do want to retrieve the evidential value of Christian experience and Christian living. Wesley's discourses and sermon on the 'Witness of the Spirit'[15] place the Spirit's witness within the *ordo salutis*: we cannot love God unless we are first aware of God's love towards us and we only truly know of God's love through the Spirit's witness. And towards the end of his series on the Sermon on the Mount (Sermon 32) Wesley, in distinguishing between true and false prophets, urges his hearers to base their judgement on the evidence of fruitfulness; good teaching will issue in good fruit and bad teaching in evil fruit.
Such evidence is best placed within a conversation rather than set out as a formal argument. What for Wesley and early Methodists was evidence internal to the committed Christian community – a source of assurance and a sign of the perfecting work of the Spirit serves, I suggest, as the best basis for an apologetic dialogue. Of course, such a dialogue cannot – like polemical argument – aim a knock-out blow at unbelief. It has to listen, seek understanding and share testimony. It requires Christian communities with the confident humility to share their Christian experience and to exhibit the kind of holy living the presence of which makes Christianity credible and the absence of which makes it unbelievable.

[15] Sermons 10, 11 and 12 in Albert Outler, ed. *The Works of John Wesley: Volume 1, Sermons 1-33*, Abingdon, Nashville, 1984.