

More Than A Commentator: Matthew Henry the Apologist



The Presbyterian minister Matthew Henry (1662-1714) has been described as “a remarkable pastor and writer, whose written ministry has far exceeded the impact of his spoken ministry during his lifetime.”¹ He has earned the reputation of being a practical Bible commentator due to the long and worldwide popularity of his six-volume exposition of the Bible, eliciting comments similar to Stephen Stein who observed, “Henry’s *Exposition* frequently underscored the pastoral or devotional side to the biblical text.”² While that is true, my doctoral dissertation investigated whether Henry was more than a commentator, whether he was also an apologist for the Christian religion, and if his *Exposition* can be viewed as a part of his apologetic work.³

Central Apologetics

I first came across Henry’s interest in apologetics when I discovered he had preached a two-year-long series of sermons on ‘The reasonableness of being truly religious’ in his Chester congregation between May 1696 and May 1698, and a similar series to his second congregation in Hackney in 1713, entitled ‘Reasons why we should be Religious.’ Although most of these sermons have been lost, thanks to his biographers we do know the texts and titles of all his sermons in this series. We can, therefore, access his teaching on these texts through reading his commentary, which was largely based upon his sermons.

The only surviving sermons from these series of apologetic sermons are six addresses on Proverbs 3:17, the substance of which were published as *The Pleasantness of a Religious Life*, a book Henry sent to the press only twenty-three days before he died. In the preface to that book, Henry admitted that “the pleasantness (happiness) of religion is what I have long had a particular kindness for, and have taken all occasions to mention.” After going on to assert that “Nothing draws more forcibly than pleasure,” he explained his motive in writing:

In order, therefore, to the advancing of the interests of the divine life in myself and others, I have here endeavored, as God has enabled me, to make it evident, that the pleasures of the divine life are unspeakably better, and more deserving than those of the

1. Allan M. Harman, *Matthew Henry (1662-1714): His Life and Influence* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2012), 7.

2. Stephen Stein, *Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 24.1:63.

3. David Murray, “Matthew Henry: The Reasonableness and Pleasantness of Christianity,” (PhD diss., Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2019).

animal life: were people convinced of this, we should gain our point.⁴

In addition to the above, I searched the rest of Henry's *Exposition* for evidence of his apologetic interest, as well as his other thirty-plus publications, most of which are unknown, and found abundant evidence of his apologetic throughout his writings. Given this background, my study asked the question: *Why and how did Matthew Henry develop and use the reasonableness of the Christian faith, especially the reason of its pleasantness, to defend and commend the Christian faith in the context of his culture?*

Contextual Apologetics

As to the 'Why?' part of this question, one of the reasons Henry's apologetic emphasis has previously been missed is that insufficient consideration was given to the culture in which he was ministering. When that is taken into account, Henry's apologetic response to his culture is much more obviously central and pervasive in his writings.

The forces unleashed by the enlightenment raised a number of serious challenges to and questions of Christianity. These included: is the Christian religion the cause of conflict, instability, and division? Is there an alternative moderate religion that would be less dogmatic and divisive, more reasonable, more uniting, more stabilizing, and thus a happier experience? Can Christians and even other religions unite on a simplified and minimal creed? Is practical morality not more important than Christian belief? Is the Bible reliable or just an ordinary book with a mixture of truth and error? Is there another source of religious truth and ethics, such as nature or human reason? What's the relationship between faith and reason? How can we be sure of what is true? How do we account for the common ideas found in all religions? How do we reconcile the Bible and science? What's the way to be happy? How should Christianity respond to freedom of religion and expression, the discovery of other religions, the interest in comparative religion, the challenges of science, and the increase of immorality?

When we read Henry through the prism of these apologetic challenges and questions it is soon obvious that almost every one of his multiple publications, including his Bible commentary, had apologetic aims and content to one degree or another. He was responding to the cultural challenges of his day with an apologetic that was suited to his time and its needs.

Surprising Apologetics

It is surprising how much Henry followed the Latitudinarians (also known as the 'Latitude-men' due to the latitude they allowed in doctrine), especially in their apologetic approach. The Anglican Latitudinarians were the most influential theologians, churchmen, and apologists of Henry's era. They heard the questions the culture was asking and focused much of their speaking and writing on apologetic answers. Henry not only listened to their sermons, he read, commended, and quoted their books, and also tracked with many of their apologetic emphases, especially that of the reasonableness and pleasantness of religion.

4. Henry, 'To the Reader' in *Pleasantness of a Religious Life*, i-ii.

Latitudinarian answers to the culture's questions about and challenges to the Christian faith majored on uniting the church around a simpler, calmer, more practical, and happier religion, and using reason to support revelation rather than undermine it, all with a view to winning people to Christianity and improving society. They saw it as their job to demonstrate the grounds and reasons of Christian religion and to give a reasonable explanation of why Scriptural truth should be believed, not least because of the happy life it produced. However, with so much focus on practical morality and the happiness of Christian life, there was less focus on Christ and justification by faith in their ministries.

More research is needed to identify the similarities and differences between Henry and the Latitudinarians. However, a provisional assessment would be that while Henry generally addressed the topics that the Latitudinarians majored on, agreed with them on many points, used much of their vocabulary, and quoted them in support of his apologetic, there were some areas where he did not go as far as them. For example, he accepted a mysterious element to Christianity that reason could not access or make available. This separated him from rationalism and some Latitudinarians. Archbishop Tillotson, for instance, rejected Calvinist doctrines such as predestination and election because they contradicted human ideas of goodness and justice.⁵ While some Latitudinarians seemed to give human reason a place in deciding what was divine revelation or not, Henry, on the other hand, insisted that divine revelation had the final say.

Also, Henry's apologetic was more accessible than most Latitudinarians. Although they had similar social, pastoral, ecclesiastical, and apologetic concerns, Henry's writing had much more biblical exposition in it when compared with the Latitudinarians more philosophical and literary style.

Henry went further than the Latitudinarians in that while arguing for the rationality of biblical morality, he gave biblical reasons for biblical morality. Aware of the pressure for a more practical religion that would focus more on what people did than upon what they believed, a religion of ethics rather than of theology, Henry attempted to show that Christianity met that practical need, that it was a religion of extensive ethics, and that these ethics were both reasonable *and* biblical. So, Henry's ethics were not moralistic in the same way as some Latitudinarians.

Assessing Apologetics

When addressing the question, 'How did Henry use the reasonableness of Christianity, especially the reason of its pleasantness, in his apologetic?' we are faced with another 'How?' question: 'How do we evaluate someone's apologetics?' As this was a study in Historical Theology, or, more specifically, Historical Apologetics, I assessed Henry's apologetics in their historical context using criteria rooted in biblical apologetics and the history of apologetics up until and

including Henry's period. In summary these criteria were:

1. **Cultural:** Was his apologetic culturally relevant?
2. **Provocative:** Did it provoke ultimate questions that people *should be* asking?
3. **Epistemological:** What was its theory of knowledge?
4. **Methodological:** What methods and modes did he use?
5. **Aesthetic:** What was his style or manner of apologetics?
6. **Audience:** What was his target audience?
7. **Theological:** In what ways did his apologetic affect his theology and his theology affect his apologetic?

Each of these questions have numerous sub-questions that, taken together, will hopefully prove a helpful assessment tool for other Historical Apologetics studies. As is clear from the discussion above, Henry's apologetic certainly met the first criteria of cultural relevance. While demonstrating strengths in a number of the other areas, including his emphasis on attractive and practical apologetics, his apologetic also had some weaknesses, one of which was the problem of suffering in the Christian life. These strengths and weaknesses will now be addressed in turn.

Attractive Apologetics

Conscious of the caricatures of God in his culture, many of them based on people's negative experiences of religion, Henry attempted to present God in a more attractive and desirable way. Far from being arbitrary and authoritarian, Henry insisted that God's Word, his attributes, his works of creation and providence, and his relations to his people, reveal God as eminently reasonable. Henry set God forth as someone with a reason for all his actions and who reasoned with people to win them through their minds by presenting numerous reasons for and reasonable terms of salvation. This was a God who was therefore personal and relatable, one who came down to human level to reason and persuade people to trust in his good and gracious character, an apologetic approach that was ultimately enfleshed in Christ's incarnation. God was the ultimate apologist for the reasonableness of religion.

Henry argued for Christian unity, love, holiness, and moderation on the apologetic grounds that it would stabilize society, increase happiness, and attract people to the faith. Believing that humble and winsome apologetic persuasion, not force, was the key to advancing Christianity, he argued for it using natural theology, evidences, and the reasonableness and pleasantness of religion, especially the latter. He argued that Christian morality was a major way to happiness, and that the happiness of Christian morality would also lead people to Christianity. Conversely, he also labored to teach and persuade of the unpleasantness and undesirability of living a non-Christian life by showing its misery and its failure to satisfy basic human needs.

So what is happiness and how do we find it? This question has echoed through the ages and has produced innumerable answers. Henry's answer can be summarized as follows: *happiness is a superior composite of religious profit and pleasure, that is sourced in, designed*

and gifted by God, yet to be deliberately pursued using rational, spiritual, ecclesiastical, and, especially, practical means; in expectation of stable present pleasantness, and perfect heavenly pleasantness; with the purpose of fulfilling humanity, assuring of personal faith, and of persuading others to the Christian religion, all for the glory of God.

Although there was a danger of such an apologetic appeal to personal profit and pleasure resulting in a self-centered and self-absorbed religion, Henry's approach tried to avoid this by insisting on happiness through doing good to others, and also by his insistence on participating in the local church. His tracing of all pleasantness to God's nature and the imparting of it to God's sovereignty, kept people dependent on God more than themselves, and had the aim of maintaining the glory of God as the great aim. With such a concept of happiness, Henry proposed his answer to the culture's questions about what it was and how it could be found.

Practical Apologetics

Henry's apologetic was not merely about Christian doctrine, but also Christian ethics. His practical ethical concern is evident throughout his writing as he opposed unbiblical ethics and engaged in the vindication and defense of Christian ethics, persuading to them on the grounds of their reasonableness and happiness.

Although the cognitive dimension was first for Henry, practical concerns were never far behind, which is why he often connected reasons, especially biblical reasons, to his ethics. This connection between Christian doctrine and ethics was not only because he believed that reasoned obedience was more pleasing to God, nor was it only to prevent his ethical emphasis becoming mere legalistic moralism or externalism; it was also because he believed that a more ethical Christian life would be a more attractive Christian life and therefore an additional apologetic persuasive. In arguing for the beneficial consequences of Christian ethics, he was attempting to make such a lifestyle not only credible (reason to think it is true) and plausible (reason to think it possibly true), but desirable (reason to want it to be true).

Aware of the connection between ethics and happiness, he did not just argue for more ethics on an individual and personal level but also for a societal reformation of ethics. This was not just for the social benefit of the nation, but also for its spiritual benefit. He believed that if it could be shown that a holy nation is a happy nation, it would be an effective apologetic for Christianity. He therefore critiqued the culture's morals, connecting them with irrationality, and advocated for Christian morals on the basis of their biblical and prudential reasonableness. Like the Latitudinarians, he believed that the practice of Christian morals would produce national happiness and the opposite would produce misery. Hence the practical emphasis in his writing and his support for the various societies set up for the reformation of manners. There was a genuine desire to see personal and national flourishing through Christian virtue. Holiness was the way to happiness, in one's personal life, in family life, and in national life.

Henry's apologetic was pitched at a popular and practical level as he was primarily concerned to prepare ordinary Christians for the commendation and defense of the faith, using reasonable and biblical arguments in a winning manner. For those who wanted more detailed

arguments, he pointed them to specialized apologists both from church history and his own times. For the rest, he focused not on deep philosophical arguments, nor on complicated evidential arguments, but on reasoning from the Scriptures, on presenting biblical reasons for religion, on showing how the Bible answers the questions people are asking, and providing a biblical framework with which to view the world and everything in it.

Aware of the atheism that remained even in the Christian's heart, his reasonableness apologetic was designed to counteract that, remove rational and spiritual doubts, and increase spiritual confidence and joy. Such inner apologetics would prepare for external apologetics. Henry believed that the happier Christians were the more they would attract people to consider Christianity. Apologetics was not therefore not only for academic specialists, but something all Christians could practice.

Problem Apologetics

What about suffering though? How does Henry square his argument for the happiness of Christianity with the suffering of the Christian life? Henry was aware of this challenge to his apologetics, and despite many unqualified statements about the universal pleasantness of the Christian religion in his writings, there were places where he qualified this. This resulted in less conflict between his pleasantness doctrine on the one hand and the evidence of Scripture, his own writing, and Christian experience on the other.

However, Henry's pleasantness argument does not seem to allow for an apologetic through suffering as Bunyan did, who saw that the Christian's sustained faith in God and his Word despite every discouragement to the contrary could be its own apologetic. While the happy Christian could be a powerful witness, the submissive suffering Christian could also be a powerful witness to the truth of religion, as the Christian endures through various kinds of pain, evidencing the power of Christ and persuading onlookers of God's existence and grace.

Henry's teaching on the pleasantness of religion, especially that of the temporal happiness of a holy life, reflected a change in emphasis away from earlier Puritan thought which tended rather to identify the present earthly life of the Christian with sufferings. The conscious pursuit of happiness was also rare in earlier Reformed orthodoxy, with spiritual joy being a consequence of other pursuits rather than what was deliberately pursued out of self-interest. It is not clear whether Henry was consciously distancing himself from his Puritan heritage in following these trends of Latitudinarian thought and other contemporary influences, or whether it simply represents a contextual response to the intellectual, spiritual, economic, and cultural currents and interests of his day.

Conclusion

The Enlightenment influences that were being felt in Henry's time stressed that intellectual and moral improvement were *the* way to happiness. With his stress on both the reasonableness of Christianity and the pleasantness of the Christian life, Henry took these cultural trends and effectively said, "Yes, but get your intellectual enlightenment and moral improvement from

Christianity if you want to be truly happy.” To this end, he offered a reasonable defense of the Christian faith and a practical account of the happiness of the Christian life that would also have the additional practical benefit of a persuasive apologetic argument for Christianity. He was more than a commentator; he was also an apologist who engaged his culture with a view to defending and commending the Christian faith. The strengths and weaknesses of Henry’s apologetics call us to answer the following questions if we are to do apologetics well in our own context: As such he has much to teach us about how to do the same in our own culture

- What are the culture’s interests and how can we direct and re-present the Christian message so that it addresses these interests?
- How can we expound the Scriptures in such a way that it addresses apologetic issues and aims?
- How do we equip to Christians engage in apologetics with the unbeliever in their own heart as well as unbelievers in society?
- How can we present Christianity as rational without sacrificing or downgrading divine revelation?
- How can we promote the pleasure of Christian morals without distracting from the centrality of Christ and justification by faith?
- How can we make Christian doctrine and practice more attractive and appealing without compromising the Bible’s teaching about suffering and self-denial in the Christian life?.

Henry’s apologetic will not work in our own day without modification, but these questions prompted by this study can guide us in how to follow the strengths of his model without succumbing to its weaknesses.

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