

## The Unexpected Defenders: Meet the Women Apologists



**Apologetics has long been a bastion of men—until now.**

**Andrea Palpant Dilley/ March 26, 2015**

Holly Ordway began her conversion to faith in a casino in Reno, Nevada, surrounded by slot machines. She had just competed in a North American Cup fencing tournament and was having dinner with her coach and his wife. “One of the Narnia films had just come out,” Ordway told me. “Our discussion of the film led to the question, *Does God exist?*”

As they talked late into the night, she traveled through a Lewisian wardrobe that landed her in a mysterious new country. “I discovered it was possible to think rationally about the faith,” says Ordway. “There were arguments that at least stood up to preliminary testing. That was a fundamental aha moment, when my intellect was able to wake up and say, Okay, this is interesting. It was frightening and exciting.”

At the time, Ordway was in her early 30s and teaching literature and composition at a public college in Southern California. Since graduate school, she had thought of Christians as superstitious, Christianity as a “blemish on modern civilization,” and the Bible as a collection of fairy tales. “I was radicalized as an atheist and hostile toward Christians in general,” says Ordway.

But as she continued talking to her coach and reading works of apologetics—including N. T. Wright’s defense of the Resurrection—Ordway confessed faith in Christ. Now she finds herself in another new country, directing the master in apologetics (MAA) program at Houston Baptist University (HBU), a small liberal arts college in the heart of the nation’s energy capital. There, she is among a burgeoning group of women who are reshaping apologetics in the West.

“These women are expanding the scope of apologetics beyond the traditional male bastion,” says Lee Strobel, author of *The Case for Christ* and now on faculty in the MAA program. He sees his colleagues as building a movement that’s “cutting across gender and racial barriers” to draw more people to faith.

“Women bring a deep relational intelligence to apologetics,” says Kelly Monroe Kullberg, founder of the Veritas Forum, a university-based organization that hosts apologetics events across North America and Europe. “They bring a sense that biblical truth is the highest love for human beings.”

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“The next big breakthrough in apologetics will come from women,” says John Mark Reynolds, HBU’s provost and former Biola University philosophy professor. “If Genesis is true—if you believe male and female are deep categories that are tied to the creation of humankind and the image of God—then to fail to hear a woman’s voice on a topic would be to fail to hear something the Holy Spirit is saying to our generation.”

The MAA program was born in part from Reynolds’s experience as a public apologist. “When I would give a talk about the Russian Revolution, a particular kind of person would light up,” recalls Reynolds. “I knew there must be people who wanted something more than analytic philosophy. For every person I met interested in ‘five reasons to believe in God,’ a thousand others were interested in thinking Christianly about film and literature and economics.”

A few years ago, Reynolds was sitting at his desk when the idea coalesced. It eventually became the first US program in “cultural apologetics,” which looks at faith and reasons for faith through an interdisciplinary kaleidoscope of art, literature, film, history, theology, and philosophy. The program has an online arm that draws nontraditional students, many of whom are also raising kids, pastoring churches, and working jobs. “I’ve got everyone from an engineer to an opera singer,” says Ordway.

For some, apologetics brings to mind a bespectacled white male at a podium brandishing the intellectual equivalent of a semiautomatic rifle. Other critics join Martin Luther in calling reason a “whore” who offers herself to the master with the most money. Faith is about heart knowledge, not head knowledge, they say. Some academics dismiss the enterprise of apologetics as presupposing a secularized, Enlightenment view of faith and reason.

Cultural apologetics has emerged in the midst of this discussion. It draws from the best of classical apologetics and yet meets objections by expanding in new, innovative directions. The program at HBU is leading this project. Among the faculty are Nancy Pearcey, author of *Total Truth* and *Saving Leonardo*; Mary Jo Sharp, director of the ministry *Confident Christianity*; Melissa Cain Travis, a national speaker and author for *Apologia Press*; Kristen Davis, an engineer who runs *DoubtLess Faith Ministries*; and Ordway, an *Inklings* scholar with a PhD in literature. They’re thinkers who can pull their weight and evangelists motivated by a deceptively

simple objective: Tell people the Good News. And for those who already know that, equip them to “give the reason for the hope that you have.”

### **Diagnosing Disbelief**

“What can we learn about unbelief?” Ordway asks her class, holding *The Top 500 Poems*. On the table next to her rests *The Portable Atheist*, a 2007 salvo edited by the late Christopher Hitchens. She looks nearly pastoral in her black blazer and gray button-up shirt. At 5’3”, she commands the class with her voice. Opposite Ordway are seven MAA students, among them a working single mom, a businessman, and a female Chilean doctor. They’re eating Chick-fil-A and Snapea Crisps while listening to Ordway discuss the poem *Carrion Comfort*.

“How does despair seem like comfort?” asks one student, incredulous that poet Gerard Manly Hopkins has linked the two.

“As a former atheist I quite understand that—the comfort of despair,” says Ordway. “Wrestle with it some more.”

After a moment, the student responds. “If my vision of reality is one of despair, at least I’m fully aware of who I am and what my context is.”

“It’s about being brave and facing the dark,” says another.

“I’m glad you see that connection,” says Ordway, nodding. “Now we’re pulling on some of the threads in the emotional content of atheism.”

If Hitchens could return from the disbelieving dead and hover over the classroom, he might be disarmed by the pastoral care on display here. He might get the sense, as I do, that Ordway is trying to understand disbelief the way a good doctor understands the pain of a patient, conveying that sympathy to her medical students as they lean over a hospital bed.

“You can’t just expect people to hear a debate and then convert,” says Ordway, snapping her fingers. “We should keep in mind the pain and difficulty involved in taking a step of faith.”

Ordway’s colleagues share her philosophy. “We have to learn the language of our culture,” says Pearcey, who teaches other MAA courses. “This person in front of you has been influenced by the entire scope of Western intellectual history, and often he doesn’t even know where those ideas came from. Your job is to understand him.”

‘Women are the last frontier. No one in apologetics is writing for them.’ ~ Mary Jo Sharp

“Apologetics is an integral part of evangelism,” says Cain Travis. “More often than not, the non-Christians we encounter have at least one serious intellectual objection to the faith.”

Cain Travis, one of two newer faculty members in the MAA program, specializes in philosophy of mind and “natural theology,” which looks at arguments for God based on reason and scientific

study. She holds a master's in science and religion from Biola University and is currently working on a PhD while teaching at HBU and speaking at conferences and in churches. Davis, the other new faculty member, is a software engineer who teaches part-time at Southeastern University and HBU. Her ministry, DoubtLess Faith, offers classes and conferences throughout the Southeast.

Although each faculty member has a specialty, all consider cultural apologetics essential to their interdisciplinary approach. For Ordway, it offers a framework for connecting people to those deep parts of ourselves that search for beauty in films, books, and music. The goal is not to foster a vague transcendence, but to enable an encounter with the living God.

“*Who is Jesus?* is a question that matters,” says Ordway. “What can we do to help people become interested in asking that? The arts have a huge role to play.”

Ordway, also a published poet and prose writer, spent last summer at the University of Oxford researching for a book of literary criticism on J. R. R. Tolkien and other modern fantasy writers. She recently released a revised edition of her memoir, *Not God's Type*, which maps her journey from atheism to Catholicism. In writing the story the second time, says Ordway, she added a storyline: the role of the imagination.

Ordway grew up reading Tolkien and C. S. Lewis, and although she didn't know it at the time, their books opened up a space in her for something sacred, holy, other.

“God was working in my life below my conscious awareness,” says Ordway. “My imagination was growing toward faith when my reason was explicitly rejecting it. If I hadn't found satisfactory answers for my reason, I wouldn't have become a Christian. But the imagination played a huge role in making the questions meaningful.”

### **Rapper's Delight**

“How many of you know hip-hop artist Lecrae?” asks Pearcey during a lecture at the College of Biblical Studies, located in a converted real-estate complex near Highway 59 in Houston. The class of 30 is mostly minority, first-generation students, among them a woman in East African dress and a man wearing a yarmulke. Copies of Pearcey's *Saving Leonardo* are splayed open next to banana peels and fast-food cups. Here, Pearcey is both guest lecturer and celebrity—her book *Total Truth* is a bestseller, and she is perhaps the best-known scholar among the MAA faculty.

“I keep getting Facebook friend requests from other Christian hip-hop artists who say, ‘Lecrae told me to read your book,’ ” she says, referring to *Total Truth*.

“You're hip now,” quips a student in the front row.

“I'm hip now,” she echoes, “I'm hop now.”

Both the class and Pearcey seem humored that she—a diminutive, middle-aged woman wearing a paisley scarf and beige button-up jacket—could forge a friendship with a rapper. “[Pearcey’s work] has given me more confidence,” Lecrae told me. “She’s not concerned with creating some kind of subculture for Christians.”

Her project, in fact, is to obliterate the notion that faith is a subculture. Expanding on the work of Francis Schaeffer, Pearcey’s main project is to critique the fact-value split, where faith gets relegated to the realm of subjective experience, while everything else—science, industry, politics—is protected as “truth.” Schaeffer described the problem using the metaphor of a house: the lower story is where the public facts reside; the upper story is where we keep our private preferences, values, and religious beliefs.

Pearcey sees this split manifest especially in the educational realm. “I know of a private-school teacher who on the first day of theology class drew a heart on one side of the blackboard and a brain on the other. He said, ‘The heart is what we use for religion, and the brain what we use for science.’”

‘Ultimately, apologetics is driven by love. You have to love people enough to listen to their questions and do the hard work of finding answers for them.’ ~ Nancy Pearcey

“Even some Christian colleges teach with a sacred-secular split. Course material is taught as technical knowledge while Christianity is nurtured through extracurricular activities—chapel, Bible studies, mission trips. It’s training students in a sacred-secular mindset.”

As a young adult, Pearcey fell prey to this thinking, which drove her into a crisis of faith. Visits with her parents, her pastors, and a seminary dean were fruitless. A professor even replied glibly, “[Faith] just works for me.”

“It was a difficult and dark time,” Pearcey tells me. “I walked through the library pulling philosophy books off the shelves, thinking, ‘If I can’t get the live adults to help me, maybe these dead white males will.’”

After rejecting Christianity, she ended up almost by accident at L’Abri, Switzerland. Like many others coming of age in the early 1970s, she found there an enclave of culturally savvy Christian hippies who understood the questions she was asking and were doing the hard work of finding answers. They identified her worldview as relativism, pointed out its logical flaws, and discussed Jackson Pollock paintings and epistemology over candlelit dinners. In the shadow of the Swiss Alps, Pearcey became open again to the intellectual tenability of faith. Within two years, she had given her life to Christ.

Pearcey has worked in cultural apologetics for more than four decades. She’s taught at the World Journalism Institute, was founding editor of Charles Colson’s radio program BreakPoint, and has written four books, including most recently [Finding Truth: 5 Principles for Unmasking Atheism, Secularism, and Other God Substitutes](#). She now directs HBU’s Christian Worldview Center, but her most important work might be her quiet, almost-invisible teaching ministry.

“How can a person employed at a prominent public school be open about his beliefs?” asks a student in the front row wearing a Texas A&M hat.

Pearcey steps out from behind the podium. For the next 45 minutes, she fields questions from students—here, a pastor who does prison ministry; there, an immigrant from the Middle East. She wants to offer others what was not offered to her amid crisis.

“Apologetics is driven by love,” says Pearcey. “You have to love people enough to listen to their questions and do the hard work of finding answers for them.”

### **Human Apologists**

HBU boasts the highest concentration of women of any apologetics department in the country. Naturally, I asked Reynolds: “Why so many women?”

He seemed amused and mildly offended by my question. “Why not?” he said.

The department’s female majority reflects the fact that most cultural apologetics scholars are women. Behind this fact lurks a question—what do women bring in contrast to men?—that cracks open a big, messy debate about gender differences. Reynolds is as sensitive as anyone to the potential pitfalls of their enterprise. “The errors that we could commit doing this are so subtle,” he says. Reynolds wants to avoid what he calls a “weird tokenism” that treats women as quota fillers or icons of femininity rather than as individuals who reflect the complexity of the *imago Dei*.

Ordway shares his concerns. “I’ll grant that women are more attracted to a cultural approach to apologetics and men to a propositional approach, as long as we don’t try to say that’s true for all women and all men,” she says. “That’s blatantly false. If you define apologetics in such a narrow way, you’ll shut out women as well as men with artistic temperaments. It becomes self-limiting.”

I ask what, if anything, sets female apologists apart. “Whether it’s innate or socialized,” says Pearcey, “women tend as a generalization to be more empathetic.” Sharp agrees. “Women often have a specific person in mind that they care for—a child, a spouse, a friend, a cousin. They want to help that person rather than just answer a question or combat the culture.”

Sharp in particular promotes what’s called conversational apologetics, which underscores caring for the whole person. She uses the method in her teaching at HBU, on faculty with Summit Ministries, and also in Confident Christianity, her ministry that sends her to speak to youth groups, women’s ministries, and apologetics conferences.

I first met Sharp on Galveston Island, where I heard her speak at a Christian Medical and Dental Association event affiliated with the University of Texas. The group met in a nondescript brick building at the narrow end of the island. To the south is the seawall that failed to stop Hurricane Ike from destroying the city back in 2008; to the north is a small business district that looks like a fraction of New Orleans’s French Quarter. The 25 attendees include a few former medical

missionaries but mostly medical students. They sit on folding chairs on the faux wood floor raptly listening to Sharp, who's telling a story about a guy she met recently on a flight.

"He noticed my notes and said, 'There is no empirical evidence for God.' " Instead of quoting Scripture or expounding on the fine-tuning of the universe, Sharp asked, " 'What do you mean by that?'

"He told me, 'We can only know what our senses tell us.' Then I asked him: 'How do you know that? What's your ground for thinking your senses are telling you the truth?'

"That's when he cussed me out and said, 'I don't know.' "

After the laughter dies down, Sharp tells the group that her goal was not simply to poke holes in the man's logic but rather to listen to his story—which he went on to tell—and to dignify his questions. He followed her all the way to the baggage claim. "Conversational apologetics keeps in mind that we're trying to develop excellence in relationships as well as in our arguments," says Sharp. "That's the metanarrative."

As I watch Sharp pace the room in her coral blazer and boots, her pastoral heart is more than evident. "First, know doctrine," Sharp tells attendees. Be able to clearly state what you believe. Second, listen to people. Try to understand their objections, doubts, and longings. "Bonhoeffer calls it the ministry of listening," she says. "It seems basic, but it's huge." Third, ask questions. "Finding errors in reasoning is a loving thing to do," she says, but let others own the experience. Finally, respond. "If you don't know the answer to a question, say, 'I don't know.' Then go look it up."

Sharp grew up in a secular home in the Northwest, came to Christ during college, and then, not unlike Pearcey, stumbled into a faith crisis. Unable to find anyone who could answer her questions, she went to her church library, where she discovered *The Case for Christ*. Strobel's classic introduced her to other authors such as William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland. After completing Biola's master in apologetics program, she started *Confident Christianity*. Within four years, the nonprofit was blossoming especially in one area: women's ministry.

"Women are the last frontier," says Sharp. "No one [in apologetics] is writing for them." Often a woman in her 60s will come up after a talk to say, "Where have you been all my life?" Many of them want to meet in women-only groups, where they feel safe expressing doubts and questions they've never asked in church or anywhere else.

In response, Sharp wrote *Defending the Faith: Apologetics in Women's Ministry*, and is currently working on a curriculum for churches titled *Living in Truth*. Her last study, *Why Do You Believe That?* also written primarily for women, was released by LifeWay Christian Resources and is being used in 1,600 US churches.

"Women have this misperception that theology and apologetics are something men do," says Cain Travis. "But the more women we have entering apologetics at the lay and academic levels, the more women we can disciple and draw into loving God with their minds."

Even though Sharp and some of her colleagues feel called to minister to women, I get the sense that MAA faculty are after something bigger and broader: the church. They want it to flourish in an age of pluralism. That flourishing, they believe, depends on training both men and women to disciple believers and draw in nonbelievers through the bilingual apologetics of reason and imagination.

“Cultural apologetics is not just a nice offshoot—it’s part of the larger mission of reaching people,” says Ordway during a group lunch. We’re sitting in the corner of Houston’s Salt Grass Café, cutting into steaks and sipping iced tea before the three professors scatter to their various classes. “We’re taking a pastoral approach and addressing the full person,” says Sharp.

As they talk back and forth, they’re describing the pastoral spirit that I saw exhibited in their classrooms and one-on-one conversations. It’s a spirit that grows out of the Spirit in them. They’re living out what Schaeffer called “the final apologetic”: the love of Christ reflected in us.

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