Diskin's "The Seeds of Triumph. Church and State in Gomulka's Poland" - Book Review

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In my years of service at the Evangelical Theology Faculty in Bratislava, I became acquainted with the religious tradition of my ancestors about which I had been very curious for personal as well as professional reasons. I wanted to know the source of the life-affirming faith in which I was raised. This was a remarkable pietism that was neither unchurchly nor hostile to natural life, but joyfully persuaded of the real presence of the Lord Jesus in the believer’s life. I was also interested to learn of this Christian faith’s historical experience in Slovakia, crossroads of Europe where Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism and Calvinism intersect. I wanted to learn how the faith had endured 50 years of modern oppression, first under fascism, then under Marxism. I was and remain an eager student of Slovak Lutheran theology. Welcomed in 1993 by the chair of Systematic Theology, Prof. Igor Kiss, I always enjoyed a good partnership with him; I appreciated his attempts to bring Luther research to bear on contemporary social ethics and more generally on the many difficulties facing Slovak church and society. I had little grasp of what that would mean in 1993. I dare now to offer some settled thoughts about this for Cirkevne Lysty at the invitation of Libor Bednar.

To be sure I came to Slovakia with some ideas of my own about the cultural shipwreck of Christian faith in Europe stemming from the wars of religion in the 17th century and consequently the renewed urgency in our day of the ecumenical imperative of our Lord in John 17. In the time after 1989 I did not hide my conviction about the importance for theology of embracing contemporary cultural pluralism and taking a public role within it. Above all I came with Augustinian convictions about the nature of theology as the life of the mind disciplined by the gospel in and for the whole church. As students will recall, I frequently chastised them for thinking that they could give their hearts to Jesus, while leaving their minds to the devil. I regard this anti-theological attitude as the fundamental corruption of contemporary Christianity, whether in Slovakia or America or anywhere else. In place of theology, an intellectually lazy and spiritually proud denominational ideology appears, which does not call the church forward to the Lord, but justifies existing ways, at any cost, no matter what.

The time in Slovakia was interesting for me also, because during the same period contemporary Slovaks were in the process of recovering their tradition, which 45 years of Bolshevism
had tried to erase from memory. I learned a great deal from these studies (often in the form of Diplomova praca directed by Profs. Hajduk and Vesely, as well as the books and articles of these two distinguished researchers). I learned about Cyril and Method, the Hussites and the Synod of Zilina, about Jan Amos Comenius and Juraj Tranoscius and Matej Bel and Ludovit Stur and Samuel Osusky and the Lutheran lay leaders of the Slovak National Uprising and even unconscious sons of this tradition, like the noble Alexander Dubcek, and many others who, in terrible political and economic circumstances were a light of faith and reason in the darkness of superstition and authoritarianism.

No Going Back!

Yet in learning all this, the feeling that too many contemporary Slovak Lutherans pined for a lost glory in the golden past began to disturb me more and more. Christianity, as a living message from God to each new generation, can never rest on past accomplishments, and even an historical education in what Christianity meant in the past never suffices to commend it in the present. I remember reading Pastor Kyska’s account of the role Lutherans played in the Slovak National Uprising: how unlike the Catholics they rejected Tiso’s puppet regime and dared even to collaborate with the Marxist partisans. As a result they fully expected that at the end of the war their confessional stance would be publicly vindicated and the masses would turn to the Lutheran church away from a discredited Catholicism. Kyska’s ruefully concluded: it was not to be. The new order of socialist humanity would not make any such distinction between better and worse versions of the same religious illusion.

There was, I should say, a hidden grace in the common persecution of Evangelical and Catholic by the Communists: Christians were put together once again on the ship of faith, albeit in chains. Prison memoirs by Catholics and Protestants alike bear witness to this reality of common prayer in the prisons, work camps or uranium mines. Yet in the oppressive climate of the 1950s, many followed the counsel of the Czech theologian Hruska under the influence of Barth: Marxist restriction on the life of the church is God’s judgment on the Church’s privileged past. The Church must accept this restriction as coming from God and humbly serve humanity under socialism. Anonymous diaconal service must now substitute for public proclamation of the gospel. Theology must turn away from heavenly themes and “face life.” As we know (but still do not known enough about), under the pretext of this so-called ‘theology facing life,’ the faculty and the episcopacy were purged, the clergy was intimidated and countless wounds of betrayal and suspicion were rendered which fester to this day. A horrible shadow-culture of isolation, self-pity, resentment and malicious gossip is the on-going gift to the present of theology under real, existing socialism.

Whatever I shall go on to say in this article about the problems and prospects of theology in Slovakia will be written in vain if this fundamental problem, which is more spiritual in nature than intellectual, is ignored. Nothing like a true public confession occurred. Memory was never cleansed. How many faculty meetings did I endure in which one or the other whispered to me, “That one has blood on his hands!” How much dirt is still cast around to intimidate, blackmail, or defame others!
How false all pious acclamation of our Lutheran theology of the forgiveness of sins—real not imaginary sins (Luther)—must sound in a community incapable of telling the truth about itself and just so relying on God to cleanse and heal! “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.”

Because the church lives by faith in the forgiveness of sins, it knows that as a phenomenon of history, Christianity will always be ambiguous. The old ironic observation goes: Christ promised the kingdom of God, but what we got was the church. The irony points to the vanity of a church that pretends to be the kingdom of God rather than merely its sign or sacrament, pointing to it. But rightly, the church proclaims Christ as the promise of the kingdom of God. The only unambiguous thing about the church is this Christ whom she proclaims, when she proclaims Christ as the good reason for trust in God’s coming kingdom and consequently the good reason for faithful, hopeful, loving service in his name.

For human reason, it will always be an open question until the eschatological finale, whether the churches have represented or betrayed the Kingdom of God. No amount of historical study can overcome this stumbling block. Just so, for every new generation it is a real decision of faith whether or not to join the church, in that here and here alone Jesus Christ is proclaimed as God’s YES. This applies even, if not especially, to those churches that think of themselves as reformed. Applying this critical principle to ourselves in our own history and tradition, indeed, is the practice of repentance at the heart of the Lutheran reformation. The very first of the 95 Theses reads: “When our Lord Jesus Christ said, “Repent!” he meant for the whole life of the believer to be one of repentance.” This applies as well to our life together as church, as the people of God. As Luther himself put it in his early Commentary on Romans: “This is the true people of God who continually brings to bear the judgment of the cross upon themselves.” Note well: not on the others, but upon themselves. Semper reformanda is the real living spirit of Lutheranism. It is spiritually opposed to any doctrinaire form of ideological Lutheranism (which can be “liberal” as well as “conservative”), frozen like a display in a museum, nursing ancient grievances against other Christians in order desperately to hold on to shrinking numbers of loyalists, when the real movement of the gospel in history has passed it by.

I call such “theology” denominational ideology, because it gives up the true, critical task of testing the spirits to support partial human, historical and indeed tribal loyalties; it always works to justify existing thinking and practice; it never asks for the new thing the God of the gospel is doing; it turns God into an idea that we can control, manipulate and predict; it never leads to serious self-examination. No matter what the question, the outcome is always the same: we were right, we are right and we will be right—let all others be damned!

As a newcomer in Slovakia coming after the fall of the communist regime, nothing was more obvious to me than the urgent need for re-evangelizing, re-catechizing, re-churching contemporary people. The understandable desire of the longsuffering faithful to reclaim their past, however, was often in tension with this need. Professor Karol Gabris, a great scholar and one of the very few who
had the moral integrity to apologize to the public for more or less coerced collaboration with the former regime, once told me that he thought it was unbelief to go out and evangelize. He called it “methodism,” by which I think he meant using psychological or sociological insights to find more effective means of communicating the gospel to contemporary people. He said people would come back to the church on their own, if only we preached the “pure” gospel, by which he meant “with no admixture of politics.”

Gabris was right to criticize simplistic political preaching, especially after “theology facing life” had proven a reliable lap dog barking out the Czechoslovak Bolshevik propaganda. He was also not wrong to fear the loss of precious things in the rush to embrace new ways. He was right that the one real “method” is the means of grace, working conversion to faith by the preaching of the Word of God, and this through the modernization, not renunciation, of liturgical worship. He was right to distrust the low ethics of entertainment evangelism that were flooding into the former Warsaw Pact countries from the West in this time (one of America’s most shameful exports!). But he was not right, in my view, to think that the liberated church of 1989 could return to 1948 to pick up where it had left off. The model for parish ministry now could not be the official pastor of the past, who fills the week with funerals and weddings and baptisms for stoly, and then preaches on Sunday – satis est! Post-Marxist society no longer supports such Kulturprotestantismus.

Here Julius Filo, ml. was right and remains right. The urgent need is for church renewal, beginning with new models of gospel ministry, which reach out and re-evangelize the people. One should think the same way about theology, which today must reach out to re-catechize people who have “come of age” (Bonhoeffer). The liturgical sermon on Sunday and the ministry of pastoral acts during the week are fine, but do not suffice in a cultural situation in which the memory of Christianity has been largely erased and the consideration of Christianity blocked by all manner of plausible objections. Here theology must teach Christianity all over again from the beginning, and in the process meet objections never before known in the gospel’s history. For this kind of work, theology has to look forward to the future, not back to the past.

The longing for a past that no longer exists also, it seemed to me, had a further negative consequence: it tended to gloss over many uncomfortable facts of that history. I recall, for example, how astonished I was to learn of the alliance of some Protestant princes with Ottoman Turks against the Empire (memorialized in the architecture of the Evangelical church in Kezmarok) – a fact which gives at least a little credence to the Catholic charge that the Protestant martyrs of Presov were tried and convicted of political treason. It does indeed give one pause to think that Protestant-Catholic hostility had reached such an extreme that Protestants were willing to ally themselves with Muslims against fellow Christians! On another occasion, I was bemused to learn about Ludovit Stur’s inclination late in life toward mystical Eastern Orthodoxy as offering a Panslavic alternative to the Authoritarian Catholic and Enlightenment Protestant paralysis of Western culture after the Peace of
Westphalia. News of Jaroslav Pelikan’s conversion to Eastern Orthodoxy was greeted with the same sense of uncomprehending dismay among Slovakia’s partisan Lutherans. Why?

Because the serious problems regarding the ecumenical disaster of European Christianity from the wars of religion onward were simply ignored for the purposes of one-sided boosterism on behalf of “evangelical identity.” Luther’s own failings -- his attack on the Jews as instruments of the devil or his reckless depiction of the papacy as Antichrist-- were unknown to my students, though wrestling with these failings is the *sine qua non* of contemporary Lutheran theology in the rest of the world. We are to receive Luther as a teacher of the church, not a once and for all time protestant pope, who has spoken infallibly once for all *ex cathedra!* Indeed, understanding Luther’s sins is essential to retrieving for the present what is truly of universal value for Christian teaching in Luther’s legacy. But this means that Slovak theological students would actually have to read Luther and think critically, instead of nurturing tales of past wrongs that cultivate the perception of the Slovak Lutheran as a perpetual victim, incapable of action.

But too often I found students who were not encouraged to read or think critically. This correlated with the terrible habit among students merely to parrot the polemical clichés that they had absorbed without any ethical (“Thou shalt not bear false witness!”), let alone intellectual scruples. It led me to inculcate as the first principle of theological method among my students what I jokingly named Hinlicky’s Rule: “You shall not criticize the position of another in theology until you can state that position with such accuracy, completeness and sympathy, that the opponent himself declares, ‘Yes, I could not have said it better myself!’ Then, and only then, may you criticize. For then you are engaging a real alternative and advancing a real argument. Otherwise you shed only heat, not light.”

The most curious result of this tendency towards unreflective polemical theology in the name of supporting a merely ideological-sociological “Lutheran identity,” however, was the utter ignorance of Luther himself that it perpetuated. I remember once giving a talk at a pastor’s meeting on Luther’s doctrine of Christ’s bodily presence in the Eucharist. I was explaining his dispute with the Swiss reformer, Zwingli, to whom Luther refused the hand of fellowship at the Colloquy in Marburg in 1528, saying: “We have a different spirit.” (So much, in Luther’s mind, I might add, for the idea of a pan-Protestant alliance against Catholics). I reported in the lecture how Zwingli took the story of the Ascension literally and imagined that Jesus was locally confined somewhere in outer space and so could not be bodily present in the Lord’s Supper. Against this, Luther argued that one should take the Ascension story symbolically and the promise of the presence of the crucified and glorified body of Christ in the Lord’s Supper literally. As glorified, Christ’s new resurrection body is capable of presence as he promises in the words, ‘This is my body given for you.’ One pastor was quite distressed to hear all this and openly wondered if Luther was a Bible doubter or a crypto-Catholic!

Of course, until the day he died Martin Luther was never a “Lutheran.” He was and remained a “Catholic” priest. Moreover, Luther viewed Bible *together* with the ecumenical creeds as forming a whole, the *fides catholica* (see here the late Luther’s *Disputatio de divinitate et humanitate Christi*). In
this regard the slogan *sola scriptura* (which historically comes from the Zurich reformation of Zwingli, not from Wittenberg) is misleading. Not only is it actually useless as a theological principle that is supposed to decide controversies (witness the thousands of Protestants sects each claiming to have the correct *sola scriptura*!). For Luther, the Word of God in the proper sense is the eternal self-expression of the triune God: The Word for us incarnate, the crucified and risen Christ active as agent of human salvation in the gospel preaching and gospel sacraments. This is the one and only Word of God, Jesus Christ the head of the church. To Him, scripture-and-creed together bear true and faithful witness. The Bible gives us God’s self-revelation for the purpose of the church’s theology, not science, geography, cosmology, history etc., as some kind of alternative to science.

What I generalize from such –may I put the matter sharply?-- ignorance is this: while a mythical Luther as tribal hero is celebrated in Slovak Lutheranism, Luther as theologian is not very well known. And I pose the question: does the ideological need for anti-Catholic polemic in order to sustain group loyalty *prevent* better knowledge of Luther?

So where do these questions and reflections point for the future of Slovak Lutheran theology?

### The Dogmatic Task

Theology has two functions, one internal to the life of the church and the other external. The first task is teaching, “dogmatics.” This is not to be understood ideologically as indoctrinating people with a partisan set of religious ideas, which serve to separate them from others. Teaching is a function of the gospel itself. The gospel is the word/deed of God, the Easter speech-act: Jesus, friend of sinners who died in their Godforsaken place, is vindicated, raised from death, exalted as Lord, revealed the Son of God. This knowledge of God does not occur naturally to us. As it is a particular historical event encoded in a narrative, it must be proclaimed and learned. Theology therefore teaches the gospel – if it really is *evangelical* theology. Moreover, theology teaches the gospel as that which is always, everywhere and by everyone believed in the church. So it is evangelical and *catholic* theology. These teachings of the gospel are what doctrinally unite us as *the church*, i.e., not what separates us from one another into hostile confessions – if indeed we *really* are constituted the one body of Christ whenever and wherever the gospel is communicated. But the spiritual sickness –this is the diagnosis which critical theology must make—is that some refuse to be the one body of Christ. These partisans (cf. I Cor. 1:10ff) remind me of the old communist whom I meet on the train one time. After a lengthy conversation, when I disclosed that I was a Lutheran theologian, he enthusiastically said, “Ja som tiez pevny Luteran. Neverim Bohu, ale som presvedceny Luteran.” [I am also Lutheran. I do not believe in God but a convinced Lutheran.]

Someone once told me that the word *Bekenntnislos, bezvyznany*, [non-denominational] originated in the Czech Republic as a sign of exhaustion among thinking people at the warring madness of the competing Christian confessions. Theology should be at least as critical as these
“confessionless” people are, who have lost their faith in such an ideological, tribal Christianity whose theology has reduced itself to mere denominational ideology. We should lose such “faith,” for it is a false faith. The critical function of theology is to test the church with the one Word of God, Jesus Christ, the gospel of God delivered to us in the Scriptures and parsed in the ecumenical creeds. Dogmatic or teaching theology should expose false faith and then give it a push – over the cliff, into the abyss.

The genuine Lutheran contribution to the ecumenical task of dogmatics is this: the gospel of Jesus Christ is the divine speech-act (both sermon and sacrament, both visible and audible) of promise and grace in distinction from demand and duty. One really delivers the gospel when hearers of it are put right with God by it, in the act of its communication. How little in six years did I hear pastors in preaching effectively declare to their hearers, unconditionally, no strings attached: “You are for Jesus’ sake beloved and well-pleasing to God. Not because you are faithful, or Lutheran, or morally straight. In fact, we are all far from what God created us to be. Nevertheless, God has knit us together by faith with his Son, in whom he is well pleased, who gave himself once and for all in our God-forsaken place on the cross. United with this Jesus by the Spirit of God, you are pleasing to God with the very same pleasure the heavenly Father takes in his eternal Son. You can therefore really rest assured in this love, count on this favor, and proceed on the basis of this grace.” Justification by faith happens (and ought to happen every time!) when in gospel preaching and gospel sacraments Christ is so graciously conveyed that human hearts thrill at his presence and joyfully receive him, as the Spirit in this way calls faith into being. In the mere welcome of faith, faith alone, in Christ, Christ alone, there is God’s grace, all his grace and nothing but his grace. This grace of Christ is the last and final word – he really is God’s word! The imperative of Christian living only spells out this indicative; exhortation to live the Christian life only summons believers to realize what they already truly are in Christ. For indeed if really we take pleasure in God’s good pleasure in Christ, we freely, joyfully and spontaneously go on to do all our Father’s will.

Now if this critical task of teaching theology in the life of the Slovak Lutheran Church were to spring to life freshly, I can imagine a couple of questions worth exploring. As mentioned, I would wonder whether, for all the emotional talk with the endless repetition of biblical clichés, the gospel – pure gospel in the foregoing sense, grace in Christ as God’s final and unsurpassable word which thrills and delights the hearer and so moves him or her to faith and obedience—actually gets delivered to contemporary hearers all that well or all that often. I would likewise want to ask about the practice of treating the Lord’s Supper as a privilege for the mature and pious rather than as grace for the little ones and the ungodly. For example, I read in the Posol recently that the ECAV doctrinal commission had decided against earlier communion for children on the grounds that inviting children to the Lord’s Supper reflects an understanding of the sacraments working ex opere operato. If I read this correctly, this decision is a perfect example of theology as denominational ideology. Allow me to explain why.
First of all, it is incoherent. If children are to be excluded from the Supper for this reason, why do we baptize them? Why do we baptize them, and then, in effect immediately excommunicate them? Second, it is pastorally incompetent. Do we wonder why our children think that communion is something to be earned? And, having earned it, why they disappear after they have been confirmed only to reappear for a wedding and at last for a funeral? Third, it is just ignorant of Luther’s own teaching about divine faith as a gift of God also given to infants — Luther cited from the Gospel of Luke the example of John the Baptist in the womb of his mother greeting Jesus in the womb of his mother! What Luther rejected as ex opere operato is not the efficaciousness of the sacrament as God’s work also in providing God’s gift of faith, but the view that God’s work and God’s gift are something other than personal faith in Christ grasping and transforming the human recipient. Grace does not work magically or automatically or impersonally but in creating, nurturing and sustaining faith in Christ. On the other hand, does not this decision of the Doctrinal Commission actually reflect a semi-Pelagian teaching that the worthiness of the communicant lies in the correct, rational understanding of Lutheran doctrine, rather than simple faith in Christ who is present for us? (In that case, how many adults are worthy?) Does not Luther teach in the Small Catechism that the one who is truly worthy and well prepared is simply the one who hungers for Christ? Are little ones incapable of that?

Fourth, it is ecumenically regressive. In fact, the contemporary trend toward earlier communion picks up the ancient practice of the Eastern Orthodox, as it also reflects serious reform within the ranks of the Roman Catholic church away from its previous view of “implicit faith” (ignorant belief in whatever the Church says) of “spectators” toward a holistic view of faith as formed by regular participation in the distinctly Christian form of worship, the Eucharist. Even the renewal of the ancient term, Eucharist, reflects an evolution in Roman Catholicism away from the “sacrifice of the mass” (that the priest offers the body and blood back to the God the Father to placate his wrath at the people) towards the evangelical view that God offers Christ to us in the Supper so that we, who are not mere spectators watching the priest sacrifice but participants who commune, are in this action united with Christ, and in Him return the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. Thus the idea of the Eucharist fundamentally is that true worship of God is in, with and through Jesus Christ, in the specific way that he commanded us to remember him who gave himself for us. These are very encouraging developments within Roman Catholicism from the authentic “Lutheran” point of view. Whether we call the new covenant meal of Christ the Lord’s Supper, Holy Communion, the Mass, or the Eucharist is secondary; what matters is that in this meal God offers Christ to his people for their renewal, and the people, united with Christ and gifted with his Spirit, return true thanks to God.

There is much else that critical teaching theology, which is interested in the gospel faithfulness not the ‘Lutheran identity’ of the (whole) church (not just our sect), would scrutinize. But the foregoing suffices for illustrative purposes.
The Apologetic Task

As the God of the Bible cannot only be the God of the Bible, but demands to be understood as the God over all, the second function of theology is apologetic, that is, it is the attempt to interpret all of reality from the standpoint of the biblical narrative, centering in the gospel of Christ. This is the public work of theology, _ad extra_. Its task is not directly to prove the Christian faith, but rather to show the coherence and indeed beauty of the world and all its phenomena when interpreted from the Christian point of view. That coherence consists in the basic idea of God’s economy: that God kills in order to make alive, that God permits the evil of sin in order to overcome it in Jesus Christ, and that this divine economy is a process into which he calls us all. As Augustine said, God who created us without our will does not want to redeem us apart from our will. We are so involved in realizing God’s purposes in the world, because the Scripture in the first place is neither an historical record nor a deposit of universal religious symbols. It is rather a script aimed at our performance, of which God is the author. Scripture enrolls or enlists us into God’s story, makes us members of Christ, who is God’s Agent for the redemption of the world. In Christianity Scripture is not taken in Islamic or Judaic fashion as a law book, which fell out of heaven once and for all. The Scripture is rather the revealed story of the world from God’s point of view, the meta-narrative which makes sense of all the other stories of human history (including also the story of Slovaks, and Lutherans in Slovakia).

Let me provide two notable examples of this process of narrative interpretation from American theology. Abraham Lincoln interpreted the Civil War as God’s judgment on both North and South alike for the sin of slavery and said that from this death God wanted to work a “new birth of freedom,” i.e. a qualitatively new freedom of “malice toward none, charity toward all.” Martin Luther King, Jr. interpreted the Civil Rights Movement of nonviolent love not simply or primarily as political action on behalf of oppressed blacks, but as redemptive suffering, living out the life of Christ’s love for white, racist enemies, to redeem America’s soul from the sin of racism. In such ways, Apologetic theology as a prophetic interpretation of history is constantly working to filter and absorb the stories of the world and bring them, as treasure, into the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven. I wrote a lot about this in my textbook, _Apologetika_, which I believe is still available at the Theological Faculty, so I won’t repeat all that here. Let me just make a few salient points here.

One does not have to agree with Prof. Nandrasky and his friends who in the 1950s called themselves the Biologists to see that questions about the relation of modern scientific views of the cosmos and the evolution of life present a fundamental challenge to naive biblicism. Of course, enemies of Christian faith have used the discoveries of modern biology in their attempt to discredit the church and alienate the minds of modern people. Neither should one be naive about that! Yet there are two false or inadequate responses to this situation.

The first is the response of Cardinal Bellarmine who condemned Galileo for teaching that the earth revolved around the sun because that would cast doubt on the scientific truthfulness of Scripture. Many Protestant fundamentalists imitate this bad example of the Catholic Bellarmine, when they try to
uphold the literal historicity of Adam and Eve, or in general take the Bible primarily as historical record rather than salvation history narrative. The recent attack on Igor Kiss in Cirkevene Listy by Dr. Milan Beno accuses Kiss of “syncretism” because Kiss tries to interpret modern biological theory of human evolution with the Scriptural narrative in a way similar to what I am recommending. One may of course question in detail the way in which Kiss argued his case, but Beno rejects the very attempt by theology to absorb the theory of evolution into divine salvation history as “syncretism.” This criticism is quite confused. Kiss in fact contests the sole mechanism of natural selection and imagines creative divine steering of the development of life – something that any strict Darwinist would emphatically reject. On the other hand, unless we are to advocate replacing scientific research with recitation of Genesis Chapter One (are you serious, Dr. Beno?), some such interpretation of the results of contemporary science must be undertaken by theology or we become Gnostic dualists, who think that revelation forms a separate realm of true consciousness, while the physical world known by science is a false world constructed by the devil. That would really be “absurd.” I don’t mean to use the word “absurd” as an insult here, but logically. Something is logically absurd when it based on conceptual confusion.

Full discussion of this would take us far afield, but Beno is involved in what we call a category mistake, a confusion of categories. The Bible as narrative does not intend a literal account of human origins (this much could be established on a purely exegetical basis!) but it tells the history of humanity from God’s perspective: we are all Adam, fallen in to sin and exiled from Paradise until we become members of the new Adam, Jesus Christ. The story of sin and grace, of Adam and the new Adam (Romans 5!) is revealed or sacred history. This does not mean that the Bible makes no truth claims regarding events in human history. It does (for example, the birth of Jesus under Tiberius, his execution under Pontius Pilate, and the discovery of his empty tomb on Easter morning are all intended as claims to ordinary historical truth). Apologetic theology has to identify and defend these kinds of claims – but in their proper category. After all, even historical evidence that Jesus actually existed, died on the cross and that his followers found the tomb empty do not prove that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God! Nor could any such proof bestow saving faith.

So either “disproving” contemporary science or “proving” Christian faith is not the point in apologetic theology, which rather works to incorporate scientific discoveries into the Scriptural narratives and so constructs, progressively, a Christian interpretation of reality. Christians really have nothing to fear here. Indeed, the discovery that the earth revolves around the sun (and today something like the Big Bang theory) should be welcomed by Christian theology because, 1), it discredits naive biblicism as false faith, serving to distinguish that from the true and saving faith in the gospel of Christ, and, 2) it shows that the earth and humanity are not the center of the universe, that we have had a beginning and will have an end, that our time is a precious gift, which goes in only one direction, etc. This scientific knowledge correlates with the salvation history teaching that the world is not an eternal and independent reality, but a creation whose destiny is in the hands of God.
The second bad response to the scientific worldview is to treat the latest scientific theory as “gospel,” i.e., as the truth by which we should reform and correct our theological convictions. This was the position of the Biologists in the 1950s and it is erroneous for two reasons. First, science is a research program based on a strict method that is constantly revising its theories in the light of new evidence and new theories. Seventy-five years ago, Nazi race theory had, in the light of the genuine scientific discovery of genetic forces in human evolution, a certain aura of scientific plausibility. As Slovaks very well know, not so long ago dialectical materialism also had that same aura of scientific authority. The truth about science, however, is that the moment it goes beyond provisional hypothesis, it enters the realm of metaphysics (or what I prefer to call metanarrative) and thus ceases to be science. Apologetic theology should carefully observe this boundary and not allow illicit trespassing!

Second, as curious as it first sounds, Dietrich Bonhoeffer observed in the heart of Nazi darkness that today it is faith which must come to the aid of reason. The scientific cosmos, such as it appears to many today, seems to imply that we human beings are the fluke result of algorithmic processes and that human personality is nothing more than the ensemble of accidental social or economic or genetic relations. Apologetic theology must try to take this scientific cosmos known by reason and reconnect it with the Scriptural narrative, not least of all to save science itself from self-destructing on the basis of its own insights. After all, what is to hinder the highly skeptical conclusion that even the scientific knowledge of reality we have achieved today is itself an accidental by-product of irrational forces? In that case, scientific knowledge is not really knowledge but just another sophisticated illusion created on account of its survival value for our species. There are many voices today under the banner of “post-modernism,” which are attacking scientific knowledge as nothing more than a human way of organizing experience, which does not make contact with reality. But if science is merely a technique for control of nature, and not, at least provisionally, a real knowledge of nature that progressively approximates God the Creator’s knowledge of his creation, then one can radically question whether science and reason provide any standards or reality checks. That would be a disaster for humanity and a fundamental assault on the Christian belief in God’s good and ordered creation. Instead, Christian apologetic theology should try to understand precisely why modern science emerged on the soil of Christian civilization. Theology should support the scientific project of understanding the creation by reconnecting this project to the redemptive purposes of the Creator made known in Christ. It should try to link up the kingdoms of nature and grace in this way and provide contemporary people a glimpse of the final beauty of things that already now can orient human progress and inspire sacrificial human commitment.