

## Platonism and Greek Philosophy

The early Christian Fathers were Gentile Greeks and Romans. As they came to grips with their Christian faith and presented it to their contemporaries they were forced to relate it to the thought patterns of their society: Greek philosophy.

There were three major schools of philosophy which influenced the early Christian writers: Platonism, founded by Plato (died 347 BC) who had been a pupil of Socrates (died 399 BC); Aristotelianism, founded by Plato's pupil Aristotle (died 322 BC); Stoicism, founded by Zeno (died 263 BC). These remained distinct schools of thought, but by the early Christian era they had greatly influenced one another. A typical second-century Platonist would hold to an amalgam of Platonism, Aristotelianism and Stoicism, with the Platonist element being dominant.

In the third century a revised form of Platonism, known as Neo-Platonism, was set forth by Ammonius Saccas and Plotinus. Neo-Platonism stressed the ultimate transcendence of God. It became for a time a pagan alternative to the rapidly growing Christian faith. It was also deeply influential on many Christian thinkers from the fourth century on.

Fundamental to both Plato and Aristotle is the distinction between *being* and *becoming*. In this world, everything is subject to change and decay. Nothing is unchanging—it is always *becoming* something else rather than simply *being* what it is. As an earlier philosopher had noted, you cannot jump into the same river twice—it has changed in the meantime. In contrast to this world of change which is always *becoming* something else, there is, maintained Plato, a realm of *being* which is eternal and unchanging. The contrast between the two realms is seen clearly in Plato's doctrine of Ideas. For Plato there is an eternal unchanging Idea or Form of, for example, 'man'. Individual human beings are

merely pale reflections of this eternal Idea. It is the latter that is real. Thus the relation between the Idea 'man' and us men can be compared to that between a gold seal on a ring and the impressions that it makes on a number of different lumps of wax. It is the seal that is the *real* image, not the wax impressions. Reality is the realm of eternal unchanging being—this changing world of becoming is but a pale reflection of reality.

By the Christian era much of Greek philosophy had built on Plato and Aristotle in such a way as to teach clearly that there is one supreme transcendent God. This philosophical monotheism was an obvious point of contact for the Christian apologist. But there was a problem. The Greek God belongs to the realm of being. He is thus unchanging or immutable. This means that he cannot have any direct contact with this world of becoming and change. It also means that he is impassible: not subject to any emotions or feelings. The early Fathers had to grapple with the inherent contradictions between the Greek and the biblical concepts of God.

Because the Greek God is immutable and belongs to the realm of being he can have no direct contact with this world. He therefore needs a mediator between himself and the world. One common title used by Greek thought for this mediating power or principle was Logos, which means both Reason and Word. The concept of one true God with the Word as his mediator has obvious parallels with John 1, for instance, and was another point of contact for the Christian apologist. But there were problems. The Word is needed not because of sin, but simply because God cannot deal directly with a changing world. In addition, the Greek Word was clearly separate from God and inferior to him. These ideas led naturally to a denial of the true deity of the Word, a problem faced by fourth-century Christian theology.

Greek thought was predominantly negative about this world. It is temporal and changing. It was made by an inferior deity, from pre-existent matter. It was not the creation of the supreme God. The

philosophical approach to this world was usually ascetic—the philosopher sought to rise above the things of the world. This had obvious affinities with New Testament thought, but the motivation was fundamentally different. The Greek despised the material world because it was material and changing. A concept like the resurrection of the body was radically opposed to Greek thought, as Paul discovered at Athens (Acts 17:32).

The Greek philosophers saw man as essentially twofold: body and soul. The body belongs to this world of becoming and change. The soul is a 'divine spark' from the world of being, and it is rational. Just as the divine Word or Logos indwells and controls the universe, so the body is indwelt and controlled by a miniature logos (or word or reason), the soul. The *real* person is the soul. The body is like a house or a set of clothes in which the person lives. In fact, the body is often seen as the tomb or the prison of the soul. The ultimate destiny of the soul, which is immortal, is to be released from the body. Man's destiny is deification, becoming like God. This includes the goal of impassibility—total absence of all feeling and emotion.

Greek thought drew close to biblical Christianity at many points, while remaining different. The Greeks had arrived at belief in monotheism, but their picture of an immutable, impassible God was contrary to the God of the Bible who suffers and becomes man. Greek thought spoke about a mediating Word, but this concept fell short of the biblical picture of Christ. The Greeks knew that all was not well with the world but saw the problem as change rather than disobedience towards a personal God. Greek thought recognized man's need for 'salvation' but saw this in different terms from the Christian gospel.

The task of the early Christian Fathers was to express the Christian faith in relation to their Greek heritage. This meant expressing it in Greek terms, yet without distorting it. To a large extent, they succeeded in doing this. In due course Greek thought became Christian thought. During

this process of transformation most of the elements in Greek thought contrary to biblical Christianity were rooted out. But the process was not all one-way. It was not only Greek thought that was transformed. Christianity also came to be seen in a Greek way. Elements of the Greek approach which are opposed to biblical Christianity remained and affected the outcome. God was still seen as impassible, and asceticism was still based on the same ideal of impassibility. But to say that the outcome was not perfect is only to say that the early Fathers were human. It is not to belittle their considerable achievement or to claim that we could have done better.

## Apostolic Fathers

### AFTER THE APOSTLES

The Apostolic Fathers are the earliest Christian writers outside of the New Testament, belonging to what is called the 'subapostolic age'. Their writings form a bridge between the New Testament and the Apologists who wrote later in the second century, the most noteworthy being \*Justin Martyr. They help us to understand the transition from the apostolic church of the first century to the Catholic Church of the end of the second century, as described by \*Irenaeus.

*I Clement* is a letter written from the church at Rome in about AD 96 to the church at Corinth. It is traditionally ascribed to Clement, a leading figure in the Roman Church at that time, though his name does not appear in the text. The Corinthian Church had sacked all its leaders and Clement wrote in response to the ensuing division. There is a great emphasis on the importance of due order in the church, reflecting traditional Roman values as well as biblical influence. Clement also stresses the need for orderly succession in the Christian ministry. God sent Christ, who sent the apostles. They in turn appointed bishops and deacons. These then appointed their successors and those who have duly succeeded them are not to be removed

without cause. The Corinthians should therefore restore their deposed leaders to office. While Clement taught the importance of ministerial succession, it is important to note that he was unaware of the later threefold pattern of ministry: bishop, presbyters and deacons. In *I Clement*, as in the New Testament, the words 'bishop' and 'presbyter' refer to the same person.

Ignatius was bishop of Antioch at the beginning of the second century and was taken to Rome to be martyred. On the way he wrote seven letters, to five churches in Asia Minor, to the Roman Church and to Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna. Ignatius is the first writer clearly to present the threefold pattern of ministry: one bishop in a church with his presbyters and deacons. He argues vigorously in defence of this pattern, an indication that it was not yet fully established. His letter to Rome is conspicuously silent about a single (monarchical) bishop there, showing that the threefold pattern had not yet reached the West. Ignatius' main concern is with the unity of the church. The bishop is seen as the focus of unity against both schism and heresy. Finally, his own impending martyrdom preyed heavily on his mind and he welcomed it as the seal upon his discipleship.

*Shun divisions, as the beginning of evil. Follow your bishop, as Jesus Christ followed the Father; and the presbyters as the apostles; and to the deacons pay respect, as to God's commandment. Let no one do anything pertaining to the church apart from the bishop. A valid eucharist is one that is under the bishop or someone to whom he has committed it. Wherever the bishop appears, let the people be, even as where Jesus may be, there is the universal [catholic] church.*

SMYRNEANS 8

*I want all men to know that I die for God of my own freewill... Let me be given to the wild beasts, for through them I can attain to God. I am God's wheat and I am ground by the teeth of*

*wild beasts that I may be joined pure bread. Entice the wild beasts, that they may become my sepulchre and may leave no part of my body behind, so that I may not, when I am fallen asleep, be burdensome to anyone. Then shall I truly be a disciple of Jesus Christ, when the world shall not so much as see my body.*

ROMANS 4

Polycarp was bishop of Smyrna for many years. As a young man he sat at the feet of the apostle John and he also met Irenaeus, the most important Christian figure of the late second century. He received a letter from Ignatius, while still a young bishop, and later himself wrote a letter to the church at Philippi. Polycarp was martyred, probably in 155 (possibly 166 or 177), as an old man. A stirring account of his martyrdom survives in *The Letter of the Smyrneans on the Martyrdom of Polycarp*. The Roman governor tried to persuade Polycarp to revile Christ in order to gain his freedom, but he replied, '86 years I have been his servant and he has done me no wrong. How can I then blaspheme my king who saved me?'

The *Didache* or *Teaching of the Lord to the Gentiles through the Twelve Apostles* is the oldest surviving manual of church discipline. It was discovered in the 1870s but its origin is uncertain. It probably originates from Syria, late in the first century. It reflects the transition from a mobile ministry of apostles and prophets to a settled ministry of bishops [presbyters] and deacons. It contains instructions for the practice of baptism and the eucharist.

*You should baptize in this way. Having recited all these things, baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in running water. But if you have no running water, use other water and if you cannot use cold water, use warm. If you have neither, then pour water on the head three times in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*

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