

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

Christian Faith in the Greek World:

Justin Martyr's Testimony¹

By David F. Wright

Mr. Wright, who is Senior Lecturer in Ecclesiastical History in the University of Edinburgh, modestly says that he claims no originality for the contents of this essay but hopes that it may serve to commend Justin to readers who may be unfamiliar with him. Justin may in fact have something important to say in relation to the problem of communicating the gospel in today's world with its many cultures, creeds and ideologies.

Werner Jaeger has pointedly reminded scholars that 'the first stage of Christian Hellenism' was 'the use of the Greek language'. This was 'the original meaning of the word *Hellenismos* . . . With the Greek language a whole world of concepts, categories of thought, inherited metaphors, and subtle connotations of meaning enters Christian thought.'² Terms as basic to early Christian language as *theos* and *psyche* were able to bring with them from their secular past a whole furniture of assumptions and mental associations, often unnoticed or unquestioned.

Some of the doctrinal difficulties of the Church of the Fathers had their starting point here. 'The idea of one who is in a full sense Son of God sharing the divine nature is a difficult enough idea to work out and to express in terms of Jewish monotheistic faith. But once transform the biblical conception of the one God into the Platonic concept of God as a simple undifferentiated unity, and the already existing difficulty is raised to the level of logical impossibility.'³ Similar complications arose with regard to divine immutability and transcendence. 'Athens' and 'Jerusalem' often spoke about God and his relation to the cosmos in similar terms, which at best concealed the gulf that yawned between the two cities, at worst fostered extravagant notions of agreement between the two.

Nearly all the Greek Fathers reveal the influence of secular thought in their writings, not least those like Tatian who profess the strongest antipathy to 'philosophy'. Nor do we find as regularly as we should like an awareness on the part of the Fathers of crucial differences between biblical and secular wisdom. Too often they read the Greek Bible through the eyes of Greek philosophy without realising that they were wearing tinted — or tainted — spectacles.

77

¹ This paper was originally given at the second conference of the Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians at Altenkirchen in August, 1978. The theme of the conference was 'Truth and Communication: the Theological Status of Dialogue'.

² *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia* (Oxford University Press, London, 1969), 5-6.

³ M. F. Wiles, *The Christian Fathers* (Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1966), 19.

JERUSALEM AND ATHENS

This immediately presents difficulties for any examination of Greek patristic thought with regard to dialogue. Dialogue is pursued in a conscious attempt to bridge the gap between two persons, two cultures, two religions, two worlds. But in this context the two partners to the dialogue can be characterised only as Christian and non-Christian, and not as Christian and Greek, as though the Fathers were not Greeks but representatives of the non-Greek world. Nor, as Jaeger has stressed, is it meaningful to picture the Fathers as merely Greek-speaking and not also Greek-thinking. Nor again did they divest themselves wholly of their Greek cast of mind on becoming Christians or on entering into dialogue with pagan Greece. Such a feat was scarcely conceivable; to most of the Fathers it was neither necessary nor desirable.

78

What we are dealing with, therefore, is a dialogue in which the Christian participants to some extent already bridge the gap between Jerusalem and Athens. They are citizens of both communities. They vary, of course, in the degree of their involvement in the two cities. Some appear at times to have a foot in each camp, while others maintain a more precarious toehold on the Greek side. But none is ever in danger of imagining that Academy and Church were but different names for the same edifice. It was after all not a Christian but a Platonist, Numenius of Apamea, who affirmed 'What is Plato but Moses in Attic Greek?'⁴

Justin 'the Philosopher and Martyr' merits our attention as the first major Christian apologist that is accessible to us from the extant remains of second-century Christianity. At the same time he presented a highly suggestive and influential account of the relationship between the best of Greek philosophy and Christian doctrine. The lines that he laid down were by and large to be followed by nearly all the later Fathers. Yet Justin has not always had a good press. It will be my aim to depict him as a practitioner of dialogue who combined to a remarkable degree fidelity to the Christian tradition with a bold and imaginative attempt to claim secular wisdom for Christ. Excessive concentration on the Logos theory in Justin has obscured the buoyant confidence of his Christian affirmations.

Fiunt, non nascuntur Christiani, 'People are not born Christians, they become Christians', alleged Tertullian (*Apology* 18:4). This was certainly true of Justin. The early chapters of his *Dialogue with Trypho* appear to be an account of how he became a Christian. Disillusioned with Stoics, Peripatetics and Pythagoreans he found a resting-place in

⁴ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 1.150.4.

Platonism until he was introduced to the Hebrew prophets and the Christ they foretold. Yet the Christian Justin, like many of the second-century apologists, continued to wear the philosopher's pallium, to be known as a philosopher and to regard Christianity as 'the only reliable and profitable philosophy' (*Ibid.* 8). Both continuity and discontinuity mark Justin's transition from pagan philosophy to Christian faith. On the one hand, Christianity is not related to Platonism and Stoicism like the most advanced stage superseding more primitive developments in the evolution of true philosophy. On the other hand, Christianity shares with other philosophies common concerns, for example, with God and the soul, similar language and overlapping doctrines. If in the account in the *Dialogue* a conversion motif predominates, with the prophets displacing the philosophers as Justin's teachers, elsewhere he declared 'I confess that I both pray and with all my strength strive to be found a Christian, not because the teachings of Plato are altogether different from those of Christ but because they are not in all respects similar, as neither are those of the others, Stoics, poets and historians' (*2 Apology* 13:2).

79

THE TRUTH OF THE PHILOSOPHERS

For Justin it was indeed undeniable that 'on some points we (Christians) teach the same things as the poets and philosophers' (*1 Apology* 20:3). It is impossible to understand the early Christian apologists without perceiving how unquestioningly they held to this axiom. 'When we say that all things have been produced and arranged into a world by God, we shall seem to utter the doctrine of Plato; and when we say that there will be a great conflagration, we shall seem to utter the doctrine of the Stoics; and when we affirm that the souls of the wicked, being endowed with sensation even after death, are punished, and that those of the good being delivered from punishment enjoy a life of blessedness, we shall seem to say the same things as the poets and philosophers' (*Ibid.* 20:4-5).

A bare list of topics on which in Justin's view Greek writers, chiefly Plato and the Stoics, teach truth, if not the whole truth, would include at least the following: various facets of the being of God (transcendence, immutability, incorporeality, freedom from spatial localisation; cf. especially *Dialogue* 3-6), the divine creation of the world (*1 Apology* 59), the soul's affinity to God, enjoyment of free will, immortality and contemplation of the celestial realm (*Dialogue* 4:2, *2 Apology* 7:5, *1 Apology* 44:9), the 'crosswise placing' of the Logos in the cosmos and an intimation of the divine Trinity (*1 Apology* 60), punishment or blessed-

ness after death (*Ibid.* 8:4, 20:5), the need for divine revelation (2 *Apology* 10:6), and the events of the flood and the eschatological conflagration (*Ibid.* 7). If pagan mythology and religion are also considered, the similarities with Christianity extend even to the human birth in a cave of a son of God from a virgin mother, his healing miracles, riding on an ass and ascension, and the observances of baptism and eucharist (1 *Apology* 21-22, 54, 62, 66:4; *Dialogue* 78:6).

Justin has recourse to three different explanations of the parallels between Greek religion and theology and Christianity:

- (i) the demonic inspiration of the Greek writers (1 *Apology* 23:3);
- (ii) their dependence upon Moses or the prophets — the so-called 'loan theory' (*Ibid.* 44:8-9);
- (iii) the operations of the universal Logos outside the Judaeo-Christian tradition (*Ibid.* 46).

80 The first of these, provocation by demonic agency, Justin employs to discredit the parodies of Christian beliefs and practices in the Greek myths and cults. Sometimes he explicitly combines this account of things with the demons' dependence upon the prophets (1 *Apology* 54, 62). But this second explanation, *viz.*, derivation from the teachers of Israel, is normally reserved to explain common ground between secular Greek and Christian doctrines. When used in this way, like Justin's view of the activity of Logos, it invariably carried with it a positive evaluation of Greek wisdom.

It will be obvious, therefore, that Justin differentiated sharply between polytheism and philosophy. The Greek pantheon and all their works are consistently condemned by Justin. Any echoes of Christianity must be identified as demonic suggestions. Justin is very far from envisaging any *religious* syncretism between the Greek world and the Christian faith. Indeed, it was Socrates' polemic against the gods of Homer and the other poets that marked him in Justin's eyes as an outstanding example of 'a Christian before Christ' through 'participation' in the Logos (1 *Apology* 5:3-4, 46:3; 2 *Apology* 10). It was, of course, the gulf in Greek culture between reverence for the gods and philosophical theology that enabled Justin to advance such contrasting judgments about the two areas.

CHRISTIANITY THE CRITERION OF TRUTH

As we pass on to more relevant aspects of Justin's teaching, let us note first of all that he carefully refrains from basing the claims of Christianity on agreement between Athens and Jerusalem. 'We claim to be ack-

nowledged, not because we say the same things as these writers said, but because we say true things' (*1 Apology* 23:1).⁵ Consensus is not for Justin a criterion of truth. In so far as Justin's apologetic work can be called dialogue, he does not embark on it in order to arrive at true philosophy through a meeting of minds or spirits. It is not his aim to achieve a synthesis of philosophy and faith or to bring about a reconciliation of Plato and Christ.

For Justin the truth is proclaimed by Christianity. Only in so far as the Greek sages are in accord with Christian doctrines does Justin acknowledge them as teachers of truth. 'Justin does not merely use Greek philosophy. He passes judgment upon it.'⁶ And the judgment he decrees is that the philosopher's comprehension of the truth is never more than partial, and hence always compromised by an admixture of error. These limitations are directly related to Justin's view of the role of the Logos. 'Our doctrines are shown to be greater than all human teaching, because the whole truth (or rational principle, *to logikon*) became the Christ who appeared for our sake . . . For whatever either philosophers or lawgivers declared aright they elaborated by invention and contemplation in accordance with some share in the Logos. But since they were not acquainted with everything of the Logos, who is Christ, they often contradicted themselves . . . All these writers were able, through the seed of the Logos implanted in them, to see reality dimly. For it is one thing to have the seed of a thing and to imitate it according to one's capacity, but the thing itself, so partaken of and imitated by virtue of its own grace, is quite different' (*2 Apology* 10:1-3, 13:5-6).

Ultimately Justin establishes a christological criterion of truth, by fixing the fragmentary and provisional character of authentic understanding available through the active Logos prior to its full embodiment in Christ. In this way Justin succeeds in incorporating the activity of the divine *spermatikos* Logos into a rudimentary *Heilsgeschichte*. 'Christ . . . was partially known even by Socrates, for he was and is the Logos who is in every man and who foretold the future both through the prophets and in person when he was made subject to our human life and taught these things' (*2 Apology* 10:8). Against Trypho Justin endeavours to prove that the Logos appeared also to the patriarchs (*Dialogue* 56-60).⁷

⁵ Cf. *Dialogue* 6:1. The argument in *1 Apology* 18 is purely *ad hominem*.

⁶ H. Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1966), 20.

⁷ For Justin's 'theology of history' as perhaps above all else his 'distinctive and personal achievement', cf. H. Chadwick, 'Justin Martyr's Defence of Christianity', *Bulletin of John Rylands Library* 47 (1965), 275-297. I gladly acknowledge my indebtedness to this stimulating portrayal.

Jaroslav Pelikan is open to misunderstanding therefore when he asserts that according to Justin 'Christianity and its ancestor, Judaism, did not have a monopoly on either the moral or the doctrinal teachings whose superiority Christian apologetics was seeking to demonstrate.'⁸ Justin put it rather differently: 'Whatever has been spoken aright by any men belongs to us Christians, for we worship and love, next to God, the Logos' (2 *Apology* 13:4). 'With one bold stroke', commented Hans von Campenhausen, 'the whole history of the human spirit is summed up in Christ and brought to its consummation.'⁹ It is surprising that Justin never cites the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel with its presentation of the divine Logos enlightening every man born into the world, and made flesh among men. Justin's knowledge of the Gospel, however probable, remains less than certain.¹⁰ Nevertheless, it is most unlikely that Justin's characterisation of Christ as the Logos originated with him, whatever the source or sources from which he derived his description of the operation of the Logos.

THE LOGOS

82

The background to Justin's portrayal of the Logos has been a subject of continuing debate. While the term *Logos spermatikos* probably came from Philo, behind Justin's presentation we should also discern Stoic theories of the cosmic logoi, the principle of universal order and harmony, and the consubstantial logoi in each man, the directive reason which enables him to live in conformity with the order of the cosmos. But above all Justin's philosophical context was that of the eclectic Middle Platonists who interpreted Plato out of predominantly religious interests and purged Stoicism of its materialist ontology.¹¹

The technical details of the scholarly discussion need not concern us here. Since no conclusive consensus has yet been reached, it is sufficient for our purposes to note that, whatever pointers Justin may have followed in earlier Christian tradition, whether in the Johannine Prologue or elsewhere, he has filled out his conception of the Logos in dependence upon the materials furnished by Middle-Platonised Stoicism.

This inevitably raises the question whether his doctrine of the Logos

⁸ *The Christian Tradition. A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 1: *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1971), 31.

⁹ *The Fathers of the Greek Church* (A. and C. Black, London, 1963), 9.

¹⁰ Cf. L. W. Barnard, *Justin Martyr* (University Press, Cambridge, 1967), 60-62.

¹¹ Cf. C. Andersen, 'Justin und der mittlere Platonismus', *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 44 (1953), 157-195.

incorporates philosophical elements incompatible with biblical teaching. Does Justin, for example, teach the consubstantiality of the Logos which is in Christ with the logos as the reasoning principle in individual men and women? Do phrases like 'the seed of the Logos' imply that some *part* of the Logos is implanted in man? Ragnar Holte has argued convincingly, in my view, that Justin is not guilty of such theological failings.¹² *Spermatikos* is to be understood in an active sense, 'sowing' rather than 'sown', 'disseminating' rather than 'disseminated'. Holte even suggests that Justin's adoption of the term reflects the influence of Jesus's parable of the sower who sows the word of God.¹³

So the transcendence of the Logos is safeguarded by Justin without softening his bold assertion that the Logos is actively present in all men (2 *Apology* 10:8). This general presence of the Logos alone makes possible actual human comprehension of the truth, but this comprehension is never more than fragmentary, imperfect, distorted, a reflection or imitation or seed of the illuminating Logos himself. Justin's use of 'seed, sowing' (*sperma, spora*) apparently carries with it the implication not of 'the inherent power of growth, the possibility of developing towards perfection' by any organic process but of a potentiality that remains circumscribed until the full manifestation of the Logos in Christ.¹⁴

So Justin's exposition of the Logos offers no warrant for open-ended dialogue, no invitation to launch out on a voyage of mutual discovery with people of other faiths and ideologies. The controlling factor is the truth as it is in Christ which for Justin constitutes an exclusive and exhaustive touchstone. There is not a shred of justification in Justin for Pelikan's suggestion that the apologists' argument represents 'a tacit admission of the presence within Christian thought of doctrines borrowed from Greek philosophy'.¹⁵ In one sense Justin's vision may well be called open-ended, for it presumably allows for the illumination of the Logos in other cultures outside the Judaeo-Christian tradition besides that of Greece and Rome. Some hesitation is needed here, however, for Justin is not wholly clear on the relation between the philosophers' dependence on the teachers of Israel and their enlightenment by the Logos. Would Justin have been so ready to talk of the activity of the Logos in cultures where no contact, direct or indirect, with the Hebraic tradition was conceivable?

¹² 'Logos Spermatikos. Christianity and Ancient Philosophy according to St. Justin's Apologies', *Studia Theologica* 12 (1958), 109-168.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 128, where he points out that Clement of Alexandria makes the connexion explicitly.

¹⁴ Holte, *ibid.*, 142; Chadwick, *art. cit.*, 295 n. 11.

¹⁵ Pelikan, *loc. cit.*

GROUND OF CONFIDENCE

We may answer this question by suggesting that Justin's conception of the Logos provides a ground of epistemological confidence for the Christian who seeks to commend Christ to people of other cultures and religions. When Justin appeals to Christianity's critics and persecutors to give his case a fair hearing, to judge it by reason (*logos*) not prejudice or ignorance (*1 Apology* 2-3), as when he declares that Christians serve God with *logos* (*Ibid.* 13), it is often difficult to know whether to render the Greek as 'the Logos (Reason)' or 'reason'. But there can be no doubt of his confidence that he addresses his plea to people in whom the Logos has been active, although at the same time he acknowledges that when Socrates condemned the gods of the poets in accordance with *logos* he became not only a Christian before Christ but even a Christian martyr before Christ (*Ibid.* 5).

Justin cautions us against exaggerating the significance of this ground of confidence. The revealing activity of the Logos in philosophers like Socrates served to condemn the following of idolatry and thus to make men responsible before God. At one point Justin introduces the universal operation of the Logos to repel the accusation that the lateness of the incarnation left earlier generations irresponsible. 'Every race of men were partakers of the Logos . . . So that even they who lived before Christ and lived without *logos* were wicked and hostile to Christ, and slew those who lived with *logos*' (*Ibid.* 46:1-4). Without explicit quotation or allusion, Justin preserves the thrust of Paul's discussions of general revelation in Romans 1-2 and Acts 17, which leave all men guilty and without excuse before God. But overall Justin breathes a spirit of optimism that such anticipatory dissemination of true knowledge by the Logos will now find its fulfilment in the acceptance of the Christian faith.

This interpretation of the significance of general revelation for Justin is supported by two other features of his writings. In the first place he is quite unabashed in his use of the standard arguments of early Christian apologetic, especially the argument from the fulfilment of prophetic prediction. According to the narrative at the beginning of the *Dialogue with Trypho* it had been a weighty factor in his own conversion, and it occupies him throughout the *Dialogue* (7; cf. also *1 Apology* 31-53). Less prominence is given to the appeal to the miracles of Jesus, largely because one of the charges that Justin is at pains to refute is the allegation that Jesus was just another wonder-working magician.¹⁶ But the

¹⁶ Cf. Chadwick, *art. cit.*, 281.

continuing miracles of Christian agents find a place in Justin's pointers to the success of Christianity, chiefly evident in its worldwide expansion in so short a span of time (2 *Apology* 6:5-6; 1 *Apology* 53).

Secondly, Justin's own doctrinal beliefs are those of a full-blooded, uncompromising, primitive Christianity. Holte characterises him as 'a theological traditionalist',¹⁷ while Chadwick agrees that he is entirely free of 'any tendency to mitigate or to attenuate traditional beliefs, above all, his doctrines of creation, revelation in history, and eschatology, in order to meet philosophical criticism'.¹⁸ His writings stand in stark contrast to Origen's massive reply to Celsus, which overflows with qualifications, concessions and evasive cross-references to extended discussions of awkward problems in his biblical commentaries. How remarkable to encounter in one who can describe Socrates and Heraclitus as 'Christians before Christ' such a whole-hearted adherence to the fundamentals of biblical faith! How unlike so many sophisticated apologists, how different from so many modern exponents of dialogue!

A CHRISTIANITY FOR INTELLECTUALS?

85

It is true, of course, that Justin the philosopher, in his preoccupation with the Logos, instinctively views Christ as the perfect embodiment of truth, the supreme teacher, the greater than Socrates (cf. 2 *Apology* 10). Ignorance rather than unbelief or disobedience is the gravest failing of mankind (1 *Apology* 61:10 — 'the children of necessity and ignorance . . . become the children of choice and knowledge' through baptism, which is 'enlightenment'). That is to say, to some degree Justin casts Christ and Christianity in a philosophical mould, but it is of much greater significance that his use of philosophy to portray Christ bursts the bands of philosophy asunder. *Ho logos sarx egeneto* is not cited by Justin in so many words, but he makes the essential affirmation unambiguously and repeatedly (1 *Apology* 32:10; 2 *Apology* 13:4). From Justin's pen and to Justin's intended readership such a confession, no less than John's own, bears the authentic Christian stamp of *parrhesia* and *marturia*.

He must have known from Paul, if not from his own experience, that to the Greeks Christ crucified seemed sheer folly, and yet for Justin as for Paul 'the Cross is the central moment in redemption'.¹⁹ At one point he asks rhetorically, 'With what *logos* should we believe of a crucified man that he is the first-born of the unbegotten God and will himself

¹⁷ *Art. cit.*, 117-119.

¹⁸ *Early Christian Thought* . . . , 19.

¹⁹ Chadwick, 'Justin Martyr's Defence' . . . , 290.

pass judgment on the whole human race . . . ?' (*1 Apology* 53:2). The crucifixion is the one feature of Christ's earthly career that was hidden from the demons, and yet it is 'the greatest symbol of his power and rule' (*1 Apology* 55:1-2). In a fanciful exposition of natural revelation, glorying in 'this token of victory', Justin discerns the shape of the cross imprinted upon every area of life, from the sails and yard-arms of ships, the implements of tillers of the soil and the tools of craftsmen to the human form and the standards of the Roman legions (*Ibid.* 55:2-8).

Nor is Justin's Christianity for a moment reserved for the learned among men. 'Among us these things may be heard and learned from people who do not even know the alphabet, untutored and barbarian in speech but wise and believing in mind, . . . so that you should understand that these these things are not effected by human wisdom but uttered by the power of God' (*1 Apology* 60:11). 'No one trusted in Socrates so as to die for this doctrine, but in Christ . . . not only have philosophers and scholars believed, but also artisans and people entirely uneducated, despising both glory and fear and death, since he is the power of the ineffable Father and not an artifice of human reason (*logos*)' (*2 Apology* 10:8). 'The complete and perfect *gnosis* granted by Christ, is thus not limited to an intellectual aristocracy; on the contrary, the spiritual Reality, only dimly glimpsed by the great intellectuals of Greece, has now become the property of all men, independent of intellectual capacity. Such a statement must have appeared quite fantastic to the whole ancient world. It was a message with revolutionary contents.'²⁰

86

THE APOLOGIST'S CLAIM

Justin, then, was no apologetic trimmer, no partner in a dialogue of give-and-take. He was not even seeking to demonstrate the harmony of faith and reason. In one sense he was deeply pessimistic about human reason. But he was supremely confident in the Logos, who is Christ. The heart of his appeal to the philosophers was a claim, an assertion of 'the Christian right of ownership to the glimpses of truth in philosophy'.²¹ Justin is not interested in mere agreement but in the source of truth. 'It is not that we hold the same opinions as others, but that all speak in imitation of ours' (*1 Apology* 60:10). In addressing his case for Christianity to all in the Graeco-Roman world who professed to live with *logos*, Justin in effect is saying: 'What you perceive only dimly and know

²⁰ Holte, *art. cit.*, 167-168.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 113.

only in part, you perceive and know by favour of the Logos, and him I proclaim to you, Jesus Christ.'

For Christianity's contemporary dialogue with other creeds and ideologies, Justin's guidelines point the way to an evaluation of their beliefs which may be neither wholly negative (for the Logos has ever sown truth among all races) nor uncritically positive (for man's grasp of the teaching of the Logos is at best fragmentary and distorted). Above all, Justin shows us how to retain the christological focus in such dialogue, and how to summon the loftiest thoughts of men to acknowledge the lordship of Christ.