

# The Attitude of the Apologists to Non-Christian Religions

DONALD F. HUDSON

(We print below some selections from a paper on the above subject given at a meeting of the theological teachers of Bishop's College, Calcutta, and Serampore College. The original paper dealt in more detail with the writings of Justin and Athenagoras, and their relevance to conditions in India. It is hoped this contribution will be read with interest by our readers.—EDITORS.)

The modern period of the Church in India is at present in the middle of its second century, and therefore it seems worth considering this situation in relation to the situation at the same period of the Early Church. I wish to make a few rough parallels in introduction: the Christians are a minority, but a growing, and in some respects an influential minority; there are a growing number of intellectual leaders in the Church, who are able to meet non-Christian intellectuals on their own ground; the attitude of the Government is not hostile, but at times it is wary; there are strong non-Christian religions facing the Church, one monotheistic, and the other polytheistic and philosophic; there is a feeling that to be a Christian is to desert the traditional faith of the country, and therefore to be a bad citizen. All these points were true, to a greater or less degree, of the Church in the time of the Apologists, and their approach to the situation may give us some pointers to our own approach at this particular period.

The three documents dealt with in the paper are Justin's *Apology*, his *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, and the *Plea regarding Christians* by Athenagoras, all of which are now easily accessible in the Library of Christian Classics and which are the main documents of the period.

Justin was apparently a Gentile, but born in Samaria, and therefore brought up in the environment of the monotheistic rival to Christianity, Judaism. At the same time he made himself familiar with all the various schools of Greek philosophy, and became a professional philosopher. He never apparently became an official leader of the Church, but in his later life in Rome appears to have been rather like some Christian Sadhus in India, meeting and discussing with non-Christians, and bringing them to a knowledge of Christ. His conversion was due to an old man who pointed him to the Biblical revelation as the true way to the

knowledge of God, and in this Justin claims that he gained the true philosophy.

#### JUSTIN AND JUDAISM

His knowledge of Judaism is seen in the dialogue with Trypho, and his approach to monotheism was vividly illuminated for me by an experience in a conference in Pakistan about the teaching of Scripture in Arts-Science Colleges. My own approach had assumed that the most important point was to stress the positive message of Christianity, and so when we were considering a possible two-year course for Intermediate students who were not likely to have any background and might never read the Bible afterwards, I thought that the first priority should be to tell the story of the life of Jesus, and then perhaps to go on to the story of Acts, and a bit more of the New Testament teaching. The rest of the people, especially two or three who were themselves converts, insisted most strongly that the first approach to the Muslim should be through the Old Testament, starting with the people and the stories he knew from the Koran, and putting by the side the true stories from the Old Testament, of which previously he had only a distorted knowledge. This is exactly the approach of Justin to Trypho, and as far as the Muslim is concerned, we are in a better position, since Justin had to insist that the LXX was a better text than the Hebrew, which in some cases was doubtful in the extreme. The method is not to argue, but to place the true by the side of the false and let it speak. If a man is prepared to give credence to a sacred text, the way to bring home the truth to him is to do it through the text itself, and if it is possible to show the Muslim that there are contradictions in his text which are resolved in the Bible, it is possible to bring him to the truth. Justin had an advantage in dealing with the same text, and putting a correct interpretation against a false one, so that there was no criticism of the text itself, but the method is available for us also.

#### JUSTIN AND GENTILES

Justin's approach to Gentiles, which is seen in the Apologies, is very similar in method, in that it is based on an appeal to the Bible record, and an emphasis on Christianity as the true philosophy. His approach to similarities between the stories about Christ and the stories about pagan gods has an interesting *ad hominem* argument which might be applied to recent Buddhist publications; he argues that if the pagan accepts such stories about his own gods, why cannot he accept them about Christ, and therefore agree to the truth of the Bible? He also accepts the good points in other philosophies when he says, 'Those who lived in accordance with Logos are Christians, even though they were called godless, such as, among the Greeks, Socrates, and Heraclitus and others like them . . . so also those who lived with-

out Logos were ungracious and enemies to Christ, and murderers of those who lived by Logos. But those who lived by Logos, and those who so live now, are Christians.'

The fundamental approach of Justin is thoroughly Biblical. He emphasizes the continual revelation of Christ in the whole of the Bible in a way which is completely modern. We do not need to interpret the details as he did, but if he could use the Old Testament to appeal to the Roman philosophers, we, too, should be able to use it to appeal to Hindu philosophers. Just how we can do it is a matter for investigation.

#### THE APPROACH OF ATHENAGORAS

The approach of Athenagoras is in many ways similar, but the main difference is that instead of using copious quotations from the Old Testament he shows a complete and thorough grasp of Greek mythology, and the background ideas of those to whom he is speaking. His main attack is on the idea that race and religion must go together, and that therefore a man who deserts his national faith to become a Christian is a bad citizen. He quotes all kinds of peculiar forms of worship which are practised in different parts of the Empire, but none of which are proscribed as Christianity is. He quotes at length from the philosophers, showing that the Christian ideas are very similar to others which are not condemned, and then he sets out to prove on the basis of reason that the fundamental truths of the Christian faith are not unsound.

The persons with whom Athenagoras was dealing were many of them very similar to those with whom we have to deal. Nominally they were polytheists, but very few educated men had much use for the old gods, and preferred to study one or other of the schools of philosophy which were current. Some of the philosophers were serious men, earnestly seeking truth, but others were quacks, who were willing to batten on the credulity of anyone who would listen to them, and at the same time were the practitioners of various cults, mostly drawn from the Eastern parts of the Empire. Like all men, they were not consistent, and even many of the more educated still kept their hold on the old ideas, just as many Hindus will say that idolatry and the various ceremonies of Hinduism mean nothing to them, but they do not drop them altogether.

#### LESSONS FOR THE INDIAN CHURCH

If we are to meet these people and persuade them, the first need, surely, is to follow the example of Justin, in examining the things they really believe, and being prepared to provide reasons why we do not believe those things; or of Athenagoras, in getting a thorough grasp of the traditional stories, so that we can show where these stories must be criticized. Secondly, our approach

must be one of reason, not merely of emotion, and we must be prepared to start with the premisses with which they start, which means we must have the readiness to study those premisses. Thirdly, we must turn always to the account of what God has done, in the Bible, and must centre all things, as Justin did, round the revelation in Christ. Fourthly, we must be prepared to witness, not only in our arguments, but in our lives, by showing the effect of Christ's teaching, and by being able to show that those who follow him are not guilty of the things which their accusers allege, and of which they themselves often *are* guilty. Fifthly, we must be ready to say, with Justin, that everyone may not exactly agree with all we say, but if he accepts Jesus as Christ and Lord, he will be saved.

And the result? Justin was martyred!

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Man's total response to nature must include not merely the making of a pattern that may be called true but also the recognition that God is mediated to him both in the pattern and in the experience; and that therefore every experience and every experiment is an authentic encounter with the divine. As Whitehead puts it, 'every event, on its finer side, introduces God into the world!' If we could get thus far, we should cease from every contrast between nature and science, for science would be recognized as one of the languages in which God was revealed, and the work of scientists would be seen as part of God's work. We should cease to trouble ourselves about a conflict of immanence and transcendence, since both would be found in our scientific study. On the one hand, the pattern of which we dreamed would never be complete, and never fully realized: it would stand as a pointer of transcendence, over against the relativity and ambivalence of any experiment, however well conceived. On the other hand there would be immanence, since we need only to raise the stone or cleave the wood, and we should find Him... To be able to pass from the transcendence of pattern to the immanence of an authentic encounter is to have one's awareness marvellously enriched... To hold these two aspects of God together is to know that all life and every material element in it is sacramental.

C. A. COULSON

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Men may view their rôles in history as either that of *sufferers* or that of *leaders*, and if either of these functions is understood in its ultimate spiritual terms, then the two functions are fused together: the leader is specially qualified to suffer, and the sufferer is specially qualified to lead.

P. S. MINEAR