

UNIT 1C: CHURCH HISTORY

22: The Early Christian Centuries

“Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature.”

Mark 16.15

“The more you mow us down, the more we grow.

The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church”

Tertullian of Carthage (c.155-c.230)

Even a century before the Christian era, missions like those of St Paul would have been almost impossible. During the first Christian centuries borders offered few barriers to evangelists. Roman hegemony and influence united the Mediterranean world while the impact of Greek culture and the growing Jewish diaspora provided links between Mediterranean countries and the wider world. The Greek language was spoken across the Roman Empire, its client states and lands within the Persian orbit. Change was in the air and people were keenly interested in new things, including Christianity and other mystery religions – like Mithraism. Opposition to the Christian missionaries arose, at least initially, mainly from among Jewish communities who feared schism within their own ranks.

The Church of the Apostles

The Apostolic Church was based in Jerusalem and, at Pentecost, presided over by St Peter. The disciples of Jesus Christ held all possessions in common and were exclusively Jewish. This remained the case when St Peter blessed the Apostle Philip’s mission to the Samaritans and when he himself preached with St John in Samaritan villages. New converts were brought into the Law of Moses.

As we read in Acts the positive response to the Roman Cornelius, the “pious and god-fearing” centurion, was prompted by a vision of an angel. St Peter received a vision of foods, clean and unclean, and thereby stepped away from Jewish traditions of purity. When the entire household of Cornelius was baptised the Church of the Gentiles came into being.

Paul, Apostle to the Nations

Saul combined being a zealous and observant Pharisee with Roman citizenship and Hellenistic culture. He was a Jew from Tarsus (Asia Minor) and a student of the famous Rabbi Gamaliel of Jerusalem. By his own admission he was an approving witness of the death of St Stephen, the first Christian martyr, (Protomartyr), a Greek-speaking Jew, who was stoned to death. We are familiar with his miraculous conversion to Christ following the vision on the road to Damascus (c. 36) and his collaboration with St Ananias in Syria. At some point (possibly two years later) he travelled to Jerusalem to meet St Peter and St James the Just. He was formally recognized as the Apostle to the Nations thereafter. Now called Paul, he strongly opposed the adoption of the Law of Moses by Gentile converts. He regarded this as faithlessness to the Gospel and the universal significance of Jesus Christ. Jews and Gentiles alike were now inheritors of God’s covenant with Abraham through common participation in his faith rather than in the later observance of the Law of Moses. This “liberation theology” was clearly enthusiastically received as the Epistle of James was written to remind people that good works were still required of them. The contribution of St James restored a balance in Tradition between faith and the observance of the Commandments.

According to the traditions of the Orthodox Church all the Apostles travelled widely to evangelise the nations – St Andrew towards the Black Sea and beyond, St Thomas to India, St Matthew to Ethiopia etc. However, the New Testament also records the missionary travels of St

Paul, although there are accounts of him, outside the Scriptures, travelling further yet still, to Spain and even London! Around 44-46 AD he embarked on his first mission with St Barnabas and St John to Cyprus. In the year 52 AD he completed the second missionary journey to Corinth in Greece. Around 58 AD St Paul wrote the “Epistle to the Romans”. Between 58-60 AD he was arrested in Jerusalem and imprisoned by the Romans for two years in Caesarea before invoking Roman citizenship.

St Peter was executed in Rome, during the widespread persecution of Christians as scapegoats for the Great Fire which destroyed Nero’s capital in the year 64 AD. Around 67 AD St Paul also died a martyr’s death in Rome.

Growth of the Early Church

Apostolic Christianity largely disseminated its message through the Jewish synagogues in the major cities. Among the Hellenized Jews of the Diaspora this impetus soon spread beyond the original confines towards the “God-fearing Gentiles” associated with the Jewish communities. We know that Christians met in house churches, that an actual shared meal followed the Eucharist, that Psalms dominated worship, and that prophecy, glossolalia (speaking in tongues), faith healings and other manifestations of the Holy Spirit accompanied these meetings.

Apostolic order was soon augmented by an episkopos/overseer and his stand-in or representative, the presbyteros/elder who was aided by deacons/servers. Christian orders of authority were intended to preserve historical continuity with the first church in Jerusalem. These Christian authorities were responsible for the reception and baptism of converts, the administration of the Eucharist, the redistribution of goods, the deployment of what we would now call human resources and general guidance of community life and growth.

As early Christians believed that the return of Christ was imminent they were not overly concerned with structures or the Church as an institution. However, by the second century St Ignatius of Antioch in a series of letters as he was being transported to Rome insisted that the Church existed only where a canonically appointed bishop, in Apostolic succession, was to be found. The age of the Apostles was clearly over and the legitimacy of Christian pastors and teachers was now problematic. St Ignatius of Antioch placed this emphasis on the authority of the bishop in response to “false teachers” and interlopers. These included Christian Gnostics like Marcion of Sinope (c.110-160) and the Docetists. For the latter, Christ only took on the appearance of a human, his suffering apparent or symbolic. The challenge of Marcion of Sinope, who first attempted to establish the correct canon of Christian Scripture, prompted the Church to address this issue also. Nevertheless, as bishops themselves remained divided on matters of doctrine and authority, schisms continued, in spite of the clear teaching of St Ignatius.

The bishops of Metropolitan sees, based in major cities and claiming Apostolic antecedents soon emerged as the arbiters of issues impacting on Christian communities. We should note that from the late second century onwards Rome began to regard itself as having special prominence and dignity. The bishops of Alexandria, Antioch and Caesarea of Palestine asserted increasing authority after the destruction of Jerusalem (70 AD) and the dispersal of the most ancient Christian communities. From the middle of the third century, bishop Stephen of Rome claimed that the authority that Christ had granted Peter was the “spiritual patrimony” of the bishops of Rome. To some extent, this seems to have been accepted as far afield as Corinth in Greece and, to a lesser extent, by Carthage in Africa.

People of the Book

Early Christians shared a reverence for the Scriptures but, as the canon of the New Testament had not been established, what this actually entailed varied somewhat. Christians largely read

the Septuagint in the Greek (later amended by Origen) and the Four Gospels, usually in the earliest harmonised form, the Diatessaron. This was the work of the Christian philosopher Tatian the Syrian (d. c. 185). The “Shepherd of Hermas” was considered an integral part of the New Testament by many churches right up to the fourth century.

According to David Bentley Hart:¹

“In form, the early Church could be described as a form of ‘mystery religion’ –in other words, a faith into which a person was ritually initiated, that offered salvation through participation in a special set of ‘mysteries’ (that is, the sacraments), and that did not divulge its doctrines and practices to those outside its own circle. Moreover, since its adherents were forced to meet in private homes and usually in secret, early Christianity naturally gave rise to rumours. In so far as they were noticed at all, Christians appeared to constitute an eccentric, and perhaps somewhat sinister, sect and so scurrilous stories proliferated, claiming for example that Christians indulged in orgies, or practised infanticide and even cannibalism.”

The Church of the Martyrs

The Apostle St James the Just (c. 62) and other early martyrs were put to death by fellow Jews as apostates from Judaism or as corruptors of the faith. The Romans, however, only noticed Christians when they formed separate communities distinct from the Jews. The first systematic persecution erupted under Nero in 64 AD. Pliny the Younger, governor of Bithynia (111-13), reported to Emperor Trajan of measures taken against the Christians of Amastris in neighbouring Paphlagonia (Asia Minor). He sought advice and asked that guidelines be established while acting vigorously against the Christians. For the Roman authorities the

¹David Bentley Hart, *The Story of Christianity* (London 2007, Quercus) pp. 32-33.

Christians were guilty of both impiety to the gods and of innovations, hence proving the falsehood of their claims. Christians were liable to the death penalty from an early date for refusing to reverence the image of the Emperor or sacrifice to the genius of Caesar. Pliny the Younger had certain deaconesses tortured to establish the basic tenets of Christianity and was unimpressed but also decided that they were not really much of a threat. Emperor Trajan endorsed his measures but seemed to accept his findings and ruled that it was not necessary to seek out Christians. Nevertheless, the precedent was established that they should be punished whenever they were deemed to be a nuisance to the state or society.

Today scholars dispute the actual number of Christians killed in the Roman persecutions. Whatever figures we come up with, it is clear that they represented a considerable percentage of existing Christian communities, particularly in Egypt, but also in Asia Minor, Syria and Rome itself. In 155 AD the martyrdom of the elderly bishop Polycarp in Smyrna (Asia Minor) left a lasting impression on Christians and the account, the "Martyrdom", provided a blue-print for Christian witness in the face of persecution.

During the third century the Roman authorities were aiming to eradicate the Church rather than merely limit Christian growth. Major persecutions were unleashed in 235 AD by Emperor Maximinus Thrax, in 250 AD by Emperor Decius, and, more effectively, in 257 AD by Emperor Valerian. Both St Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage (200-258 AD), and St Sixtus the bishop of Rome (d.258 AD) were executed under Valerian. Martyrdom had become the supreme form of Christian witness and St Ignatius of Antioch actually forbade his friends to intervene or intercede for his life.

Irenaeus of Lyons

Irenaeus was an Ionian Greek from Smyrna (Asia Minor) and a disciple of St Polycarp who had been born and brought up a Christian. Based in Gaul (France) he wrote against the Gnostic sects

and refuted their arguments against Orthodox Christianity. He placed a strong emphasis on the episcopate, Holy Scripture and Tradition and argued for Apostolic authority. He remains the earliest witness to the canonical character of all four Gospels. Irenaeus declared the unity of salvation history, elaborating that the essence of God's plan is a process of maturation. In this light the fall of Adam and Eve in Paradise is viewed as a wilful, childish act that appropriately reflected their spiritual condition. According to Irenaeus, death and suffering appear as great evils to us until we understand that it is in this context that we truly encounter God. He is the earliest writer to develop a theology relating to the Mother of God.

Montanism

Montanus the Prophet inaugurated a Christian revival movement around 135 AD in the remote highlands of Phrygia (Asia Minor). He claimed to be or to represent the Holy Spirit (the Paraclete) and was soon in conflict with Orthodox Church authorities. The Montanists soon acquired followers amongst Christian communities far beyond Phrygia, not least in Africa where Tertullian was a Montanist apologist. Modern scholars have drawn parallels between Montanism and both Pentecostalism and Charismatic Renewal.

Montanus was accompanied by women disciples and activists, not least the women prophets Prisca and Maximilla. Prisca is recorded as claiming that Christ appeared to her as a woman. Although the early Church operated in Mediterranean societies where women were segregated from men (and often secluded or veiled as in ancient Athens) we might suspect that the prominence of women activists amongst the Christian Montanists did not help matters where the Orthodox were concerned. In the backlash, and to distinguish themselves from the Montanists, the Orthodox increasingly marginalized women in active ministry.

The Montanist capital, Pepuza, held out in the pagan persecutions but was razed by the Byzantines in the sixth century. The shrines of Montanus, Prisca and Maximilla were demolished apparently bringing an end to the movement.

Neoplatonism

This is a modern term for developments towards a more mystical philosophy that took shape amongst teachers who simply regarded themselves as Platonists in the third century AD. The Egyptian philosopher Plotinus (205-270 AD) is held to be the founder of Neoplatonism, although he claimed to be following the teachings of Ammonius Saccas (d.265 AD). The latter was either a Christian, according to St Jerome, or an ex-Christian according to Porphyry. Interestingly, Plotinus attacked Gnosticism vigorously and never treated it as a species of Christianity. Alongside Porphyry (233-309 AD), a Syrian, Plotinus is arguably well within the traditions of the Platonist School. This is in contrast to the later philosophers Iamblichus (c. 245-c. 325 AD) and Proclus the Greek (412-485 AD) who embraced theurgy and other theosophical practices.

Porphyry held that: *“the gods have proclaimed Christ to be most pious, but the Christians are a confused and vicious sect”*. Understandably, Neoplatonist thinkers were soon in conflict with their Christian counterparts; not least the Emperor Julian, a Christian Apostate (331-363 AD) and persecutor of the Church. The philosopher Hypatia (350-445 AD) who was murdered by a Christian mob in Alexandria was also a Neoplatonist. Her death has been declared to mark the bitter end of the Hellenistic era.

Neoplatonist thinkers have exerted a powerful influence on Christian theologians down the centuries, not least on St Augustine of Hippo, Boethius and Pseudo-Dionysius. Conversely their writings were also taken up by those hoping for a “pagan revival” from Julian the Apostate to intellectuals in both Byzantium and in later centuries, Renaissance Italy.

The language of Orthodox Theology, if not always the context, is redolent of Neoplatonism. The Neoplatonists saw the inevitable, gravitational return of the individual soul to the Divine Source, the Monad or One, as both the test and purpose of existence. The soul had to retrace its path back to God primarily through exercising the virtues and “asceticism” until the radiant image of the Divine was fully restored in the individual and full “henosis” or union had been achieved. According to Plotinus one must be en-Godded, becoming God, to achieve the full human potential. According to Porphyry, Plotinus achieved ecstatic, blindingly radiant union with God on a number of occasions (reminding us of the later hesychasts). Other concepts, such as the ousia/essence of God, the Divine nous/mind and the system of celestial hierarchies passed into Christianity with little modification.

Clement of Alexandria and Origen

Clement of Alexandria (c.150-215 AD) united Greek philosophical traditions with an emerging Christian theology. He presented the goal of the Christian life as theosis (deification) and reserved the term “gnostic” for active Christians who had grasped the deeper teachings of the Logos and achieved this state. Originally from Athens, he travelled widely before succeeding Pantaenus as head of the noted Catechetical School of Alexandria. In the “Stromata”, Clement expounded the doctrine of “apokatastasis” or the belief that all people will eventually be reconciled to an ever loving God in the fullness of time. He expressed the opinion that true philosophy, including the pagan variety, reveals the operation of the divine Logos, as clearly as through the Law of Moses or through direct revelation in the Gospels. According to Clement, the Logos ever surprises us by breaking down all barriers to communicate truth in novel forms to humanity at all times and everywhere. He taught that all sin has its root in ignorance and thus the knowledge of God and of goodness is naturally followed by well-doing. Against the gnostics, Clement emphasised the freedom and the inclination of all to do good.

During the persecution of Christians under Septimus Severus (202-203 AD) he was forced to seek refuge in Cappadocia, the land of the “rock monasteries” in Asia Minor. Clement was initially revered as a saint and commemorated on December 4th until the seventeenth century and finally removed from the calendars of the Western Church in 1748. His views are echoed particularly by St Gregory of Nyssa.

Origen (c.185-254 AD) was the son of the martyr St Leonidas (d.202 AD) and the student of Clement of Alexandria. He quickly outshone his mentor but his posthumous condemnation also tarnished the reputation of Clement. According to Tradition he was an Egyptian who graduated from both Greek and Hebrew studies and revived the Catechetical School of Alexandria after Clement was forced to flee. In the manner of Philo, he interpreted Scripture allegorically and was clearly influenced by the Neo-Pythagorean and Neo-Platonist ideas of his day. Like Plotinus, he taught that the soul passes through successive stages of incarnation before achieving perfection in God. Origen’s personal austerity, independence of thought and speculative, open theology brought him into conflict with the bishop Demetrius of Alexandria. This culminated in his being forced to leave Alexandria in 231 AD for Caesarea in Palestine from where he continued to teach and travel to preach against heretics. Origen was imprisoned and tortured during the persecution of Christians following a widespread plague. He suffered ill health for the remaining two years of his life and died a confessor of the church. According to St Jerome the Christians buried him with great honours in Tyre.

St Basil the Great, St Gregory Nazianzen and their early disciples at the monastic complex they founded at Annesoi in Pontus laboured to collect the works of Origen which they published under the title “Philocalia”. Nevertheless, by the sixth century self-acclaimed followers of Origen formed a distinct party in the Church and were accused of adopting extreme positions. This resulted in Origen and the so-called Origenists being anathematised at the Council of Constantinople in 545 AD and at the Fifth Ecumenical Council in 553 AD. It is now held that

certain views attributed to Origen and allegations held against him (including the widely remembered account of him castrating himself) were unfounded and owe more to the realm of polemics and propaganda than fact.

Evagrius

Evagrius (345-399 AD) was a native of Ibora in Pontus (Asia Minor) and a student of both St Basil the Great and St Gregory Nazianzen. He followed the latter to Constantinople but fled worldly entanglements, first to Palestine where he settled in a community with St Melania the Elder and Rufinus and then to Egypt where he studied under St Macarius the Great and St Macarius of Alexandria. Evagrius was the first to compile and publicise the “Sayings of the Desert Fathers” and, although a great intellectual, he was famous for refusing to teach above the spiritual or cultural maturity of any given audience. In the “Logismoi” he codified the various levels of temptation in a clear and accessible format that has remained the basis of discussions on this topic in monastic circles of the East to the present day.

Like his mentors, St Basil the Great and St Gregory Nazianzen, he was an avid student of Origen. He was probably involved in producing the “Philocalia” and further developed certain speculations regarding the pre-existence of souls and the final state of believers. On these grounds, he was condemned by the Fifth Council of Constantinople in 553 AD. Nevertheless, some of his writings survived and continued to circulate, usually re-attributed to another Church Father. St John Cassian, one of his key disciples, carried his teachings to Gaul (France) and adapted a number of works for a Western audience. The writings of Evagrius, according to David Bentley Hart:² *“constituted a kind of subterranean current within the theology of later centuries; and they re-emerged into plain view in the great 18th century Eastern Orthodox mystical anthology, the Philokalia”*.

² Ibid, p.59.

Conclusion

From St Paul, the Apostle of the Risen Christ, we have followed the early missionary endeavours of the Christian Church through the age of persecution that produced the Great Martyrs commemorated on almost every date in the Orthodox Christian calendar. We have touched on issues relating to authority in the Orthodox Church and the open-ended, speculative theology of the early Alexandrian Fathers. Some of these were posthumously condemned but their influence continued to be felt across the Eastern Christian world and down to the present day.

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