

# Golgotha, Athens and Jerusalem

## Patristic intimations of the *religio perennis*

Graeme Castleman

And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd. (*John* 10:16)

From the beginning the knowledge of God is the dowry of the soul, one and the same amongst the Egyptians, and the Syrians, and the tribes of Pontus. (Tertullian, *adversus Marcionem*)

Let us not forget that theology comprises necessarily, or nearly so, elements of universality: even while being obliged to affirm that there is “no salvation outside the Church,” it admits nonetheless that Christ can save whom he will, and that there are everywhere souls which belong “invisibly” to the one and only Church.

(Frithjof Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*)

### Introduction

The first Christian centuries were situated in the context of a resurgent attempt at synthesizing the Jewish and Gentile worldviews. The Maccabean revolt (168–7BCE) had established a valorous paradigm extolling martyrdom as the “proper” Jewish response to Hellenization.<sup>1</sup> The attempted “universalisation” of the Jewish religion through enforced syncretism had resulted in a religious and nationalistic revival that defended the Jewish identity against further incursions of alien cultures.<sup>2</sup> The failed syncretism of

---

<sup>1</sup> See 2Macc.6:18-7, 42 for examples of such martyrdom.

<sup>2</sup> As Johnson remarks, ‘it was not enough to halt the old Temple sacrifices—that was welcome to many. The pious Jews had also to be forced to make symbolic sacrifices in the new way, on altars they regarded as pagan. The *hasidim* brushed aside the reformers’ argument that these rituals signified the ubiquity of the one God, who could not be penned into a particular place of human fabrication; to the pious, there was no difference between the new universalism and the old Baal-worship, condemned so many times in their scriptures’ (*A History of the Jews*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1987, p.104). A

the high priest Menelaus—involving the deliberate violation of the Temple by the introduction of a statue of Olympian Zeus—had established a perceived dichotomy and lasting resistance to reform programmes.<sup>3</sup> This polarization, which occurred almost contemporaneous with Christ, was represented by the competing tendencies of the Bet Shammai and Bet Hillel: champions of Jewish exclusivism and monotheistic universalism respectively.<sup>4</sup> There are numerous other figures who variously inform the Jewish-Gentile question. From the Gentile camp we have the dualist Numenius, who famously proclaimed Plato to be an “Atticizing Moses.”<sup>5</sup> Among Jewish sources Philo Judaeus stands out for the magisterial nature of his enterprise and his largely successful attempt to straddle two cultures, while Josephus attempted a similar programme from a politically motivated perspective.

---

similar process took place two thousand years later during the so-called “Enlightenment” when the *haskalah* sought the reformation of Jewish belief and culture in accord with the rationalistic thought of the age. That movement too, had its excesses in casting aside aspects of the Mosaic Law as “superstitious,” conversions to Lutheran Christianity, and the shifting of the Jewish observance of Shabbat to Sunday to bring it in line with the Christian observances. Again, these excesses were resisted by a traditionalist reaction and a renewed call for Jewish purity (see Pelli, ‘The Impact of Deism on the Hebrew Literature of the Enlightenment in Germany,’ *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 6, 1, 1972).

<sup>3</sup> ‘With their failure, the reformers discredited the notion of reform itself, or even any discussion of the nature and direction of the Jewish religion. Such talk was henceforth denounced ... as nothing less than total apostasy and collaboration with the foreign oppression, so that it became difficult for moderates of any kind, or internationally minded preachers who looked beyond the narrow enclave of Orthodox Judaism, to get a hearing’ (Johnson, *A History of the Jews*, 1987, p.105).

<sup>4</sup> Johnson: ‘... the original argument between the Sadducees, who admitted only the written Pentateuch, and the Pharisees, who taught the Oral Law, had by Jesus’ time been supplemented by a further argument... One School, led by Shammai the Elder took a rigorist view especially on matters of cleanliness... On the other hand, there was the school of Hillel the Elder... He brought with him a more humane and universalistic notion of Torah interpretation. To Shammai, the essence of the Torah lay in its detail; unless you got the detail exactly right, the system became meaningless and could not stand. To Hillel, the essence of the Torah was its spirit: if you got the spirit right, the detail could take care of itself. Tradition contrasted Shammai’s anger and pedantry with Hillel’s humility and humanity...’ (*A History of the Jews*, 1987, p.127).

<sup>5</sup> Numenius, in *The Neoplatonic Writings of Numenius*, Lawrence: Selene Books, 1987, frag.13. Like Philo, Numenius employed the same allegorical methods he used for Homer (frag.54) with Jewish and Christian Scripture, comprehending its content as a kind of “philosophical mythology”; see frags.24, 58, and 65. For a discussion on the influence of Alexandrian Jewish esoterica on Numenius see Quispel, ‘Hermes Trismegistus and the Origins of Gnosticism,’ *Vigiliae Christianae* 46, 1, 1992, pp. 7-10, 13-14.

It is with this world clearly in the foreground that we approach the seminal development of Christianity's understanding of the "*religio perennis*." By *religio perennis* is designated the perpetual (perennial) economy or function of the divine Wisdom (Sophia), by virtue of which a real salvific or liberating bond (*religare*, "to *bind* together") or covenant is established between heaven and earth. This bond is, in the words of Frithjof Schuon, 'the descent of the divine Principle which becomes manifestation in order that manifestation may return to the Principle'<sup>6</sup> and is, moreover, essential to the human condition as such: of the order of grace that is natural to man, what Schuon repeatedly calls the "supernaturally natural."

It is our purpose to announce the Christian synthesis of the early Church Fathers, from whom the conceptual framework of Christian theology unfolded. I have avoided Scripture as a support for this endeavour for two reasons: firstly, it has been done satisfactorily elsewhere; secondly, Christian exclusivists can equally employ Scripture in support of their position,<sup>7</sup> thus reducing the matter to the validity of varying exegetic methods. From an orthodox or traditional point of view it is the Church that establishes the validity of one reading of Scripture over another and so it is to the Church Fathers that we turn. Furthermore, our investigation is confined to the ideas and expositions prior to the conversion of Constantine and the imperial sanction of the Church, because this event, whatever its positive outcomes, led to a certain obscuration of theology under the pressures and temptations of political authority.

Approaching the Fathers one must be careful to recognise that this immense collection of works, stretching over several centuries and from the full expanse of the ancient world, does not form a catechism but rather a corpus not unlike that of Jewish *midrash*, with a large number of differing views and interpretations presented without comment.<sup>8</sup> The Patristic literature includes heretics, schismatics, scholars, saints and martyrs. As a collection, it presents us with a remarkable witness to those ideas,

---

<sup>6</sup> Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, London: Perennial Books, 1965, p. 140 In this phrase Schuon deliberately echoes the Patristic refrain attributed to St Athanasius amongst others: '[God] became man so that we might be made god'—Athanasius, *de incarnatione verbe* (On the Incarnation of the Word) 54.3; cf. Irenaeus, *adversus haerese* (Against Heresies) 3.19.

<sup>7</sup> See Cutsinger, 'Perennial Philosophy and Christianity' in *Christianity: The Complete Guide*, ed. Bowden, London: Continuum, 2005 for a brief account of both applications of Scripture.

<sup>8</sup> Although of a different literary form: *midrash* is largely aphoristic, collecting short statements by several authorities on one theme or portion of scripture together; Patristic literature presents extended treatises grouped by author.

expositions, exegeses and teachings that would prove of enduring value to Christianity, as well as those which would wither on the vine. It is important to remember that it includes teachings that have been judged incompatible with the Christian revelation—if not in their explicit content then in their implications—sometimes, as in the cases of Origen and Tertullian, in the same writer. Still, the growth of a genuine tradition, as Titus Burkhardt notes, ‘resembles that of a crystal, which attracts homologous particles to itself, incorporating them according to its own laws of unity.’<sup>9</sup> In other words it is synthetic, absorbing into its own structure insights, conceptual frameworks, and practices that are compatible with it while protecting itself against those which are not. It is the integrity of the whole that is at issue and the need to adhere to its own unity that would inform the unfolding of the Christian Revelation, surpassing the individualities of the Church Fathers in the unfolding of the whole. It is our contention here, and our purpose to demonstrate, that the *religio perennis* (although not named as such) is not only current amongst the ante-Nicene Fathers but essential to an orthodox vision of Christ and Christianity.

### Who has spoken through the prophets...?

And God said “Let us make man.” Does not the light of theology shine, in these words, as through windows; and does not the second Person show Himself in a mystical way, without yet manifesting Himself until the great day? Where is the Jew who resisted the truth and pretended that God was speaking to Himself?<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> T. Burkhardt, *Alchemy: Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul*, tr. W. Stoddart, Louisville, Kentucky: Fons Vitae, 1997, p.17.

<sup>10</sup> St. Basil, *In Hexaemeron* 9.6. For the sake of convenience and for the ease of the general reader, references to the Church Fathers follow the translations and numbering system of the American Editions of Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans); Philip Shaff, ed., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Series I*, 14 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans); and Philip Shaff and Henry Wace, eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Series II*, 14 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans). While these editions are not always the best translations, nor reflective of more recent critical editions of the texts, they have the virtue of being readily available in libraries and online. In instances where the translations (or the text upon which the translations are based) is insufficient for the purposes of this paper, I have noted such and retranslated as required.

*Ignatius of Antioch and Marcion of Sinope*

Ignatius of Antioch (c.35–c.107), on his way to martyrdom in Rome, warned the Magnesians: ‘Be not deceived with strange doctrines, nor with old fables, which are unprofitable. For if we still live according to the Jewish law, we acknowledge that we have not received grace.’ As the longer version<sup>11</sup> makes clear in a reference to *2 Corinthians*, ‘Old things are passed away: behold, all things have become new.’ As a result ‘those who were brought up in the ancient order of things have come to the possession of a new hope, no longer observing the Sabbath, but living in the observance of the Lord’s Day.’<sup>12</sup>

Ignatius criticises those who would recognise Christ yet abide by the Mosaic Law, writing:

... let us learn to live according to the principles of Christianity. ... Lay aside, therefore, the evil, the old, the sour leaven, and be ye changed into the new leaven, which is Jesus Christ. ... It is absurd to profess Christ Jesus, and to Judaize. For Christianity did not embrace Judaism, but Judaism Christianity, [Χριστιανισμὸς οὐκ εἰς Ἰουδαϊσμόν ἐπίστευσεν, ἀλλ’ Ἰουδαϊσμός εἰς Χριστιανισμόν]<sup>13</sup>

The longer version gives:

It is absurd to speak of Jesus Christ with the tongue, and to cherish in the mind a Judaism which has now come to an end [παυσθέντα]. For where there is Christianity there cannot be Judaism.

The choice of words is instructive. Judaism does not end in the sense of having achieved a completion or perfection (τέλος) but simply stops, is silenced, or even *negated* (παύω).<sup>14</sup> Ignatius perceived a radical discontinuity

---

<sup>11</sup> The authenticity of the longer versions of these letters is dubious; regardless of their authorship they add a dimension of interpretation entirely in accord with the shorter texts.

<sup>12</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, *epistula ad Magnesios* (Letter to the Magnesians) Ch 9. Again, the longer version elaborates: ‘But let every one of you keep the Sabbath after a spiritual manner, rejoicing in meditation on the law, not in relaxation of the body.’

<sup>13</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, *Magn.* Ch 10. Literally: ‘For Christianity did not believe in Judaism, but Judaism in Christianity.’ In the context of his supercessionism, which is addressed throughout this section of his letter, his meaning is clear: *For Christianity did not anticipate Judaism, but Judaism anticipated Christianity.*

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Ignatius of Antioch, *epistula ad Ephesios* (Letter to the Ephesians) Ch.14: ‘None of these things is hid from you, if ye perfectly (τελείως) possess that faith and love towards

and incompatibility between the dispensation of the Jews and that of the Christians. It seems that he was either unable to consider Judaism in its ideal aspect or believed that the integrity (and hence efficacy) of the Jewish tradition had collapsed to such an extent as to be unrecoverable.<sup>15</sup> Similarly Frithjof Schuon remarks that ‘the situation of Judaism in the face of Christ was not that of a perfectly homogeneous and fully orthodox religion, and... the nascent Church was clearly aware of this, to say the least.’<sup>16</sup> While there is some uncertainty over his view of Judaism, it was for him either evil by nature or had become evil through degeneration; whatever the case, it was an impediment to salvation.

There is a certain metaphysical law—however exaggerated—at work in Ignatius’ position, for the axial penetration of a revelation into the created order results in a disruption of horizontal continuity. As Jean Borella observes,

The advent of a new revelation supposes... a divine intervention in the cultural tissue of such and such a humanity, a tissue that cannot but be torn apart in some respects... Each religion is the fruit of a divine initiative which, in a certain manner, breaks with the weft of prior traditions and therefore had no need of any jurisdiction whatsoever to sanction it: God knows what he is doing.<sup>17</sup>

While Judaism “anticipates” Christianity it does not define or limit it: rather, Christianity understands itself to have surpassed the limits of Judaism, not just in its universalism but in the content of its revelation which it understands itself to have received directly from God without the mediation of a prophet. In the Incarnation, God did not speak to a man but *became* man as such. This is strikingly presented in prologue of St John’s

---

Christ Jesus which are the beginning and the end (τέλος) of life. For the beginning is faith, and the end (τέλος) is love (ἀγάπη).’ This comparison makes it clear that Ignatius wished to avoid any positive notions of Judaism having achieved a completion in its end just as here in his Letter to the Ephesians he impresses upon his reader the end as perfection and completion in Christ (cf. Jn.9:30; τετέλεσται – ‘It is finished’).

<sup>15</sup> The history of Judaism to the present day has proved him wrong and in some ways Judaism not only re-established its integrity but has also preserved it to a greater extent than many forms of Christianity.

<sup>16</sup> Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*, Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1982, p.122.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Borella, ‘The Problematic of the Unity of Religions’: *Sacred Web: A Journal of Tradition and Modernity* 17, 2006, pp.163-164.

Gospel in which the Jewish cosmogonic teachings are revisited and “surpassed,” being understood more fully in the light of the Incarnation.<sup>18</sup> In this way, Christianity would reinterpret the entire Old Testament; in turn, Judaism would, from the point of view of its own integrity, reject these reinterpretations.

The new faith need have no horizontal continuity with the older dispensation, heaven itself being its immediate origin, mandate and validation. As Schuon says, ‘every religious Message is a Message of the Absolute; this character of Absoluteness penetrates the entire Message and confers upon it its quality of uniqueness.’<sup>19</sup> This insight is accentuated by the incorporation into Christianity of the symbolic content of the mystery religions, which offered an initiatic entry into a reordered *kosmos*. Such a reordering, initiated by the divine, destroys the old order of things, the old divisions between the worlds, and establishes a new participation in the life of the divine. So it is essential that the new faith articulates a discontinuity with its own Jewish heritage. Schuon again:

... to say that the Christian message was destined to become a religion is to say that it had to become independent of the religion that constituted its original milieu; in this case, therefore, there is much more of necessity than there is of simple possibility.<sup>20</sup>

The unqualified application of the principle of horizontal discontinuity is prone to certain inadmissible conclusions and the confusion of mistaking horizontal discontinuity for vertical disassociation. This manifests as a rejection, not just of Judaism, but also of the Jewish God. We see this in Marcion<sup>21</sup> (excommunicated in 144) when he posits two distinct divinities. The “evil Demiurge” who created the material world and bound immaterial souls to a fleshy prison of suffering and separation from God was, he taught, the divinity whom the Jews worshipped. Christians, on the other hand,

---

<sup>18</sup> As Lightfoot declares, ‘whereas Genesis begins with the creation, in Jn.1:1, 2 we are taken behind or beyond history and learn of the eternal existence of the *Logos*...’ (*St John’s Gospel: A Commentary*, ed. Evans, London: Oxford University Press, 1960, p.78.)

<sup>19</sup> Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*, 1982, p.136.

<sup>20</sup> Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*, 1982, p.125.

<sup>21</sup> Marcion’s works have not survived, except in sections and fragments preserved in the treatises of his opponents. As a result, scholars must rely upon these hostile texts for an understanding of the Marcionite position. Of especial significance is Tertullian’s *adversus Marcionem* (Against Marcion).

were under the auspices of the “Good God” through whom they might be liberated from the clutches of the evil one and the prison of material existence. What the Marcionite position lacks, but what the Church would demand, is (along with metaphysical intelligibility) the sense of sacred history that Christianity inherited from Judaism. By declaring that the Christian God has nothing to do with material existence, which is the realm of the evil God, Marcion makes the work of Divine Providence in history impossible; even worse, the assertion that God became incarnate and took upon Himself the fullness of man, body and soul becomes impossible. Yet Marcion does not reject the Incarnation, still his thought in effect limits the person of Christ to His Incarnation and post-incarnate work, thereby compromising His Godhead.

Marcion’s position offers a theodicy that is, perhaps, its primary attraction.<sup>22</sup> Still, it entails the most dangerous implication of an unqualified rejection of Judaism: either the Incarnation becomes a docetic mirage or the fullness of the Godhead is rendered metaphysically unintelligible because the evil Demiurge has sovereignty over matter.<sup>23</sup> It is essential to the Church then, for theological as well as polemical reasons, that at the same time that it articulates a discontinuity with Judaism as a function of its autonomous identity, it must also stress its continuity. The alternative is to maintain a vision of Christ that is incompatible with the absolute character of His divinity. We find such continuity expressed in an almost unalloyed form in the teachings of Theophilus of Antioch (late 2<sup>nd</sup> cent.), and it is to his position that we now turn.

### *Theophilus of Antioch*

Second century Antioch was a centre of Jewish learning and Theophilus had the benefit of the education of a Hellenised Jew. His teaching on *Logos*, Spirit, and Wisdom, reflect the hypostasising interpretation of the *Wisdom of Solomon* and the general thrust of Hellenised Judaism. In essence, Theophilus was a Hellenised Jew who saw the *Logos* and Spirit (the two are often merged) at work in Christ as they were in the prophets of old. For

---

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Tertullian, *adv. Marc.*, 1.2.

<sup>23</sup> Thus the Church was to articulate a very different theodicy; see Castleman, ‘Cosmogony and Salvation: The Christian Rejection of Uncreated Matter’: *Sophia: The Journal of Traditional Studies* 9.2, 2003/04, pp.122-127.



Theophilus, the Mosaic Law retains its authority:<sup>24</sup> his interpretations of Scripture follow the modes and content of haggadic midrash prevalent in Jewish thought and his Christianity is an extension of this Hellenic Jewish foundation.<sup>25</sup> While his Judaism is mostly unremarkable, his Christianity is autodidactic and idiosyncratic. Therefore, while his Christological interpretations of the Old Testament theophanies (employing established Jewish exegetic methods) would prove of enduring value to Christianity, many elements of his Christianity would not.

For Theophilus, Christianity is a natural continuation of Judaism and is ultimately indistinguishable from it. The Christian *gnosis* is a quantitative addition to the Jewish *gnosis* of his heritage in seamless continuity with it. His descriptions of Christians and Jews, churches and synagogues are virtually identical<sup>26</sup> and he devotes four chapters of his third book to demonstrating the agreement of the Torah, the prophets and the gospels.<sup>27</sup> Those who are in the service of God he variously identifies as Jews,<sup>28</sup> Christians<sup>29</sup> and (possibly) both.<sup>30</sup> Christ adds to, even completes, the Mosaic covenant but he does not abrogate it. Theophilus understands Christ as the “True Prophet” promised to the Hebrews in Deuteronomy:

I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him. And it shall come to pass, that whosoever will not hearken unto my words which he shall speak in my name, I will require it of him.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Theophilus does not, however, mention the ritual circumcision or the keeping of the Sabbath, and employs a revised Decalogue (Grant, ‘The Problem of Theophilus’: *The Harvard Theological Review* 43, no. 3, 1950, p.194.)

<sup>25</sup> ‘For his exegesis Theophilus generally turns back to his Jewish or Jewish-Christian teachers. Almost everything in his exegesis can be paralleled in Jewish haggadic literature’ (Grant, ‘Theophilus of Antioch to Autolyucus’: *The Harvard Theological Review* 40, no. 4, 1947, p.237; see 234-242, 254-55).

<sup>26</sup> See Grant, ‘The Problem of Theophilus,’ 1950, pp.188-196.

<sup>27</sup> Theophilus of Antioch, *Ad Autolyicum* (To Autolyucus) 3.11-14; cf. Tertullian, who acknowledges the distinctions between the Old Testament teachings and those of the new (*adv. Marc.*, 4.1.)

<sup>28</sup> Theophilus, *Autol.*, 3.9.

<sup>29</sup> Theophilus, *Autol.*, 3.4.

<sup>30</sup> Theophilus, *Autol.*, 2.30.

<sup>31</sup> Deuteronomy 18:18-19.

The nature of this “True Prophet” is like that of Moses, a human vehicle through whom God speaks to the people, and the message he conveys is of the same order of knowledge as that of the entire prophetic lineage. The Islamic distinction between two orders of prophets, *rasul* and *nabi*, is instructive here. The *rasul* brings a new Revelation and therefore establishes a new religion, discontinuous with those that came before. The *nabi*, on the other hand, restates an already existing revelation, revivifying and correcting it. For Theophilus, Christ is a *nabi* following on from the revelation given to the *rasul* Moses. There is no room, from Theophilus’ perspective, for the formal break with Judaism of the Pauline tradition (indeed, he is anti-Pauline) that found such a vocal champion in Ignatius. Theophilus’ position is almost the polar opposite of Ignatius’ yet is prone to similar limitations: it reduces Christ to His human nature, diminishing Him and His message.

It is insufficient to claim that Christ fulfills the Law in the same way that the last drop of water fills the glass. Such a claim would be permissible of a human messenger but not of the Divine Messenger who rends the veil between heaven and earth, making the unknown God fully known.<sup>32</sup> The tradition would assert (although not in the language of Islam) that Christ’s salvific economy is that of the *rasul*. Being God, however, He is also greater than the *rasul*, whose function He assumes without being limited to it. With Gospel and Pauline precedent, Christianity would understand both its founder and His revelation as being of a superior order of *gnosis* than that given to the *rasul* Moses.

### *Tertullian*

Tertullian (c.160–c.225), often described as the Father of Latin Christianity, presents an unambiguous exposition of *religio perennis* which he employs in his supercessionist theology to uphold the validity of Christianity as a new revelation and to dismiss the continuing validity of the Mosaic covenant. While this is his primary concern in *adversus Iudaeos* (An Answer to the Jews), he also presents its universal significance, asking rhetorically:

---

<sup>32</sup> Without, however, compromising His “hiddenness.” Pseudo-Dionysius: ‘he is hidden even after this revelation, or, if I may speak in a more divine fashion, is hidden even amid the revelation. For this mystery of Jesus remains hidden and can be drawn out by no word or mind. What is to be said of it remains unsayable; what is to be understood of it remains unknowable’ (*Epistle 3*, 1069B). This paradox lies at the heart of the Palamite theology of divine essence and energies.

For why should God, the founder of the universe, the Governor of the whole world, the Fashioner of humanity, the Sower of universal nations be believed to have given a law through Moses to one people, and not be said to have assigned it to all nations?<sup>33</sup>

This dilemma, heightened by the historical nature of the Incarnation, is a common one and one regularly employed to advocate the acceptance of the *religio perennis* amongst Christians. Jean Borella formulated it thus:

... it is hard to accept the idea that God has left millions and millions of men, for perhaps one or two million years, not only in ignorance of the true religion, but even under the sway of false ones.<sup>34</sup>

Tertullian's solution is to distinguish between eternal law—the *lex aeterna* (*religio perennis*)—and the temporal or historical laws, which are particularizations and images of the eternal.<sup>35</sup>

But—as is congruous with the goodness of God, and with His equity, as the Fashioner of mankind—He gave to all nations the selfsame law, which at definite and stated times He enjoined should be observed, when He willed, and through whom He willed, and as He willed.<sup>36</sup>

This is the same law in each circumstance and to each nation inasmuch as it is the same eternal law that is the prototypical source of each temporal modulation. If it were not so then one could not say that God is good. This argument has been challenged as sentimental and it may certainly be employed in such a way.<sup>37</sup> To dismiss it on such grounds, however, is to overlook the fact that the alternative is contrary to the nature of the divine itself. The *lex aeterna* (*religio perennis*) is, according to Tertullian, a direct function of the very nature of God. The Absolute does not withhold itself

---

<sup>33</sup> Tertullian, *adversus Iudaeos* (An Answer to the Jews), 2.

<sup>34</sup> Borella, 'The Problematic of the Unity of Religions,' 2006, p.166.

<sup>35</sup> The legend of the "Harrowing of Hell" provides another such solution. Justin Martyr also addresses this issue; see *1 apol.* 46. While the theme of universalism in Christianity could be fruitfully explored in reference to this salvific work accomplished *from the tomb*, it lies beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>36</sup> Tertullian, *adv. Iud.*, 2.

<sup>37</sup> See Borella, 'The Problematic of the Unity of Religions,' 2006, p.167.

but by its perfect goodness and justice makes the means of salvation available to all as an act of grace. As Plato says, “in God there is no envy.”

Tertullian’s position is based on an orthodox understanding of the Incarnation and is therefore inherently realistic: human conceptions of Justice and Goodness are at least partial reflections of the divine attributes. As a result, a theory of the *religio perennis* is not only possible but necessary for Christianity. In contrast, the Marcionite position, being unable to accommodate a concept of sacred history, is nominalistic, or even anti-realistic. The fate of those who lived prior to Christ does not weigh upon the Good God’s nature because the material and temporal order is not of Him. That those souls be damned for not knowing Him is at best of no interest and, at worst, is a necessary corollary of Marcion’s theology: they belong to and worshipped the evil Demiurge.

Tertullian calls the Edenic law, the primordial manifestation of the eternal law, the *embryo* of all subsequent laws, which are the unfolding of that primordial seed and the making explicit or manifest the possibilities contained in the first command not to eat of the forbidden tree: ‘Which law had continued enough for them, had it been kept.’<sup>38</sup> Because Edenic man breached the primordial covenant which bound him to God, subsequent manifestations of this same law were necessary. The Decalogue is contained in principle in the primordial law, which is ‘the womb of all the precepts of God.’<sup>39</sup> And so,

... in this general and primordial law of God, the observance of which, in the case of the tree’s fruit, He had sanctioned, we recognise enclosed all the precepts specially of the posterior Law, which germinated when disclosed at their proper times.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> Tertullian, *adv. Iud.*, 2.

<sup>39</sup> Tertullian, *adv. Iud.*, 2. The passage continues: ‘In short, if they had loved the Lord their God, they would not have contravened His precept; if they had habitually loved their neighbour—that is, themselves—they would not have believed the persuasion of the serpent, and thus would not have committed murder upon themselves, by falling from immortality, by contravening God’s precept; from theft also they would have abstained, if they had not stealthily tasted of the fruit of the tree, nor had been anxious to skulk beneath a tree to escape the view of the Lord their God; nor would they have been made partners with the falsehood—asseverating devil, by believing him that they would be “like God;” and thus they would not have offended God either, as their Father, who had fashioned them from clay of the earth, as out of the womb of a mother; if they had not coveted another’s, they would not have tasted of the unlawful fruit.’

<sup>40</sup> Tertullian, *adv. Iud.*, 2.

If one bond between heaven and earth is breached or is not present in a particular time or place, then another is given to replace it. This bond, without which there would be no existence, is ever and continuously present. Superficial differences and horizontal discontinuities between one manifestation of the *religio perennis* and another reflect the different conditions of the recipients but *religio* itself is everlasting.

Tertullian describes the “primordial Law” as “unwritten”: ‘before the Law of Moses, written in stone tables, I contend that there was a law unwritten, which was understood naturally, and by the fathers [patriarchs] was habitually kept.’<sup>41</sup> This is the Uncreated Intellect of Plotinus.<sup>42</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr observes that this is the spiritual organ of perception that ‘pierces the density and coagulation of cosmic manifestation,’ which is ‘endowed with the possibility of knowing the Absolute,’ and which is ‘the direct means of access to that Original Reality that “was” at once the source of cosmic reality “at the beginning” and is the origin of all things in this eternal “now”.’<sup>43</sup> Adrian Snodgrass clarifies the contrast between the Intellect and the ratio-cinative mind:

The mind has to do with thought, which has form, and the Intellect with Forms, which are formless; the mind is a faculty of distinctive and discursive knowledge, the knowledge that is indirect and mediate, whereas Intellect apprehends intuitive knowledge, the knowledge that is direct and immediate.<sup>44</sup>

Snodgrass’ contrast between Intellect and mind is instructive in paralleling the distinction between eternal and temporal laws. Tertullian considers this same principle in its universal human context, declaring:

---

<sup>41</sup> Tertullian, *adv. Iud.*, 2.

<sup>42</sup> Compare, for example, Plotinus, *Enneads* 4.3.13: ‘...it is not from without that the law derives the power by which it is executed; on the contrary the law is given in the entities upon whom it falls; these bear it about with them. Let but the moment arrive, and what it decrees will be brought to act by whose beings in whom it resides; they fulfil it because they contain it; it prevails because it is within them; it becomes like a heavy burden, and sets upon them a painful longing to enter the realm to which they are bidden from within.’ And 5.5.12: ‘... all that exists desires and aspires towards the Supreme by a compulsion of nature, as if all had received that without it they cannot be.’ (MacKenna translation.)

<sup>43</sup> Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, New York: SUNY, 1989, p.2.

<sup>44</sup> Snodgrass, *Architecture, Time and Eternity: Studies in the Stellar and Temporal Symbolism of Traditional Buildings Vol.1*, New Delhi: Aditya Prakashan, 1990, p.16.

The greater part ... of the human race, although they knew not even the name of Moses, much less his writings, yet knew the God of Moses; and even when idolatry overshadowed the world with its extreme prevalence, men still spoke of Him separately by His own name as God, and the God of gods, ... To none of the writings of Moses do they owe this. *The soul was before prophecy. From the beginning the knowledge of God is the dowry of the soul, one and the same amongst the Egyptians, and the Syrians, and the tribes of Pontus.* ... Never shall God be hidden, never shall God be wanting. Always shall He be understood, always be heard, nay even seen, in whatsoever way He shall wish. God has for His witnesses this whole being of ours, and this universe wherein we dwell.<sup>45</sup>

Tertullian's reconciliation of the seeming incompatibility between revelation and intellection is echoed by Schuon, who explains that 'An irreducible opposition between intellection and grace is as artificial as it could be, for intellection is also a grace, but it is a static and innate grace...'.<sup>46</sup> The distinction, maintains Schuon, is primarily that between microcosm and macrocosm and 'the diverse religions actualize objectively that which is contained in our deepest subjectivity. Revelation is to the macrocosm what intellection is to the microcosm.'<sup>47</sup> This is a distinction within the order of manifestation, between the corporate and the individual, and while this manifested distinction entails distinction in the divine economy, it should not suggest differences in content except those of temporal modulation as we have already seen Tertullian describe. In any case, the correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm—as above, so below—makes any attempt to present the two as contradictory, untenable. The revealed law, Tertullian explains, confirms the inner, intellectual recognition of the divine, applying to the human collectivity as intellection applies to the individual. He writes:

But, that we might attain an ampler and more authoritative knowledge at once of Himself, and of His counsels and will, God has added a written revelation for the behoof of every one whose heart is set on

---

<sup>45</sup> Tertullian, *adv. Marc.*, 1.10, emphasis added.

<sup>46</sup> Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, p.69.

<sup>47</sup> Schuon, *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism*, Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1986, p.4.

seeking Him, that seeking he may find, and finding believe, and believing obey.<sup>48</sup>

One may distrust one's own perceptions—even spiritual or noetic perceptions—but when the internal, intellectual, knowledge is confirmed externally, through the agency of prophets, only willful rebellion against the nature of reality can explain the refusal to accept it. The whole *kosmos*, from the interiority of the individual human soul to the social collectivity and the testimony of nature itself, speaks of God.

For from the first He sent messengers into the world,—men whose stainless righteousness made them worthy to know the Most High, and to reveal Him,—men abundantly endowed with the Holy Spirit, that they might proclaim that there is one God only who made all things...<sup>49</sup>

Tertullian's purpose was to defend the Pauline perception of the Incarnation as initiating a new relationship between heaven and earth. For Tertullian, this is explicable as a new temporal manifestation of the eternal law. This new dispensation in Christ fulfils the expectations of Judaism in the Incarnation but also surpasses them in the Resurrection.<sup>50</sup> Thus it is continuous with Judaism in one respect but discontinuous in another. This new modulation or manifestation supplants the previous ones, for it is in the nature of temporal things to come to be and to pass away and this is, he declares, the fate of the Mosaic covenant which was temporal<sup>51</sup> and hence temporary,<sup>52</sup> and is now suppressed,<sup>53</sup> abolished,<sup>54</sup> obliterated,<sup>55</sup> having reached its cessation.<sup>56</sup> The Mosaic Law, he claims, is perpetuated for two purposes only: firstly, the Torah testifies to the true God—'Whoever gives ear will find God in them [the sacred books of the Jews]; whoever takes

---

<sup>48</sup> Tertullian, *apologeticum* (Apology) 18.

<sup>49</sup> Tertullian, *apol.*, 18.

<sup>50</sup> Kaufman, 'Tertullian on Heresy, History, and the Reappropriation of Revelation': *Church History* 60, no. 2, 1991, p.173.

<sup>51</sup> Tertullian, *adv. Iud.*, 6.

<sup>52</sup> Tertullian, *adv. Iud.*, 4.

<sup>53</sup> Tertullian, *adv. Iud.*, 7.

<sup>54</sup> Tertullian, *adv. Iud.*, 3.

<sup>55</sup> Tertullian, *adv. Iud.*, 3.

<sup>56</sup> Tertullian, *adv. Iud.*, 3.

pains to understand, will be compelled to believe'<sup>57</sup>—and secondly as a punishment: 'This, therefore, was God's foresight,—that of giving circumcision to Israel, for a sign whence they might be distinguished when the time should arrive wherein their abovementioned deserts should prohibit their admission into Jerusalem...'<sup>58</sup>

Theoretically, there is no impediment to believing in the possibility of two modulations of the *religio perennis*, addressing differing human temperaments, being contemporaneously active and intact. Even if we accept, as Tertullian does, the superiority of the Christian dispensation then the rejection of Judaism's continued validity does not necessarily follow from it. The truth of the Mosaic covenant is not altered in any way by the emergence of Christianity (whatever its virtues) and there is no persuasive reason why it should not continue to be efficacious. In fact, it might be said that the Mosaic covenant cannot be abrogated in principle precisely because it is a modulation of the *lex aeterna*.

The issue of continuing Jewish validity becomes more urgent when we consider the position of Justin Martyr (c.100–c.165), with whom Tertullian is largely consistent but who articulates the perceived superiority of Christianity over Judaism in greater detail.

### *Justin Martyr*

Justin distinguishes between a Judaism prior to the Incarnation and the Jews who lived during and after the Incarnation. For the Jew, according to Justin, there 'was appointed to be performed' certain requirements—such as the observance of the Sabbath—'by reason of the hardness of the people's hearts'<sup>59</sup> and their 'ingratitude towards Him'.<sup>60</sup>

You [Jews] have now need of a second circumcision, though you glory greatly in the flesh. The new law requires you to keep perpetual sabbath, and you, because you are idle for one day, suppose you are pious, not discerning why this has been commanded you: and if you eat

---

<sup>57</sup> Tertullian, *apol.*, 18.

<sup>58</sup> Tertullian, *adv. Iud.*, 3. This interpretation of circumcision is also found in Justin Martyr's *dialogus cum Tryphone Judaeo* (Dialogue with Trypho) 92. In the same chapter Justin puts forward another argument that Tertullian would adopt, namely, that the Mosaic Law is proved temporary because of the Scriptural testimony that the righteous, such as Noah, lived before the covenant sealed by circumcision.

<sup>59</sup> Justin Martyr, *dial.*, 45.

<sup>60</sup> Justin Martyr, *dial.*, 27.



unleavened bread, you say the will of God has been fulfilled. The Lord our God does not take pleasure in such observances: if there is any perjured person or a thief among you, let him cease to be so; if any adulterer, let him repent; then he has kept the sweet and true sabbaths of God. If any one has impure hands, let him wash and be pure.<sup>61</sup>

For Justin the ritual observances of the Mosaic Law were laid upon the Jews because they were incapable of the interiority demanded of the Christian. Because they could not abide by the “circumcision of the heart” a “circumcision of the flesh” was given to them: because they were incapable of a perpetual interior Sabbath they were required to observe an exterior Sabbath.

There is a fundamental misapprehension at work here. The Mosaic Law transforms interior states by exterior forms while the Christ transforms exterior states by force of His interiority. Both traditions address the need for human transformation (or transfiguration) in the light of God and base their pedagogy in an acknowledgement of the interpenetration of the inner and the outer.<sup>62</sup> The Mosaic Law emphasises the ability of exterior forms or states to effect an interior transformation, while the teachings of the Christ—and many of the patristic theologians considered here—emphasise the need for interior states to manifest in exterior forms. Neither tradition properly understood in the fullness of their teachings (rather than the excesses or limits of certain practitioners or the deteriorations of certain times) considers one to the exclusion of the other. The difference between the two traditions here is one of emphasis, not exclusion.

If one considers the Jewish covenant abolished and inefficacious, as did Tertullian, then one asserts that a large portion of mankind is bereft of its divine inheritance irrespective of their volitional acceptance of God: the immediate interiority which Christianity demands is simply not within the reach of all men: many (including many Christians) require the exterior regulation of the divine law as a mean to access and transform interior

---

<sup>61</sup> Justin Martyr, *dial.*, 12; cf. Tertullian, *adv. Iud.*, 3: ‘For, as the carnal circumcision, which was temporary, was wrought “a sign” for a contumacious people, so the spiritual has been given for salvation to an obedient people. ... the coming cessation of the old law and of the carnal circumcision was declared [by the prophets], so, too, the observances of the new law and the spiritual circumcision has shone out into the voluntary obediences of peace.’

<sup>62</sup> The underlying principle here is that which is expounded in the creation of Adam from dust and spirit and the doctrine of the resurrection in the body: in man, body and soul are distinct but they are not separable.

states. Their faith would, therefore, find itself maintaining precisely the position of Gnostic elitism—that some are born capable of earning salvation while others are born incapable—that it rejects. Whether aware of this problem or not, Justin avoids it declaring that under the Mosaic Covenant, salvation in Christ is still possible.

Then he said, ‘Tell me, then, shall those who lived according to the law given by Moses, live in the same manner with Jacob, Enoch, and Noah, in the resurrection of the dead, or not?’

I replied to him, ‘...each one, ...shall be saved by his own righteousness... those who regulated their lives by the law of Moses would in like manner be saved. For what in the law of Moses is naturally good, and pious, and righteous, and has been prescribed to be done by those who obey it; ... Since those who did that which is universally, naturally, and eternally good are pleasing to God, they shall be saved through this Christ in the resurrection equally with those righteous men who were before them, namely Noah, and Enoch, and Jacob, and whoever else there be, along with those who have known this Christ, Son of God, who was before the morning star and the moon, and submitted to become incarnate, and be born of this virgin of the family of David...’<sup>63</sup>

Still, post-Incarnation Judaism must, according to Justin, recognise its role in the rejection and persecution of Christ and Christians.

[T]hose who have persecuted and do persecute Christ, if they do not repent, shall not inherit anything on the holy mountain. But the Gentiles, who have believed on Him, and have repented of the sins which they have committed, they shall receive the inheritance along with the patriarchs and the prophets, and the just men who are descended from Jacob, even although they neither keep the Sabbath, nor are circumcised, nor observe the feasts. Assuredly they shall receive the holy inheritance of God.<sup>64</sup>

Justin is here taking aim at those Jews who, of their own will, reject the *Logos*, the Truth, and hence reject their own place in the Kingdom of Heaven. He is not damning Jews as such; those Jews who have embraced

---

<sup>63</sup> Justin Martyr, *dial.*, 45.

<sup>64</sup> Justin Martyr, *dial.*, 26.

Christ—whether knowingly or not, whether they find Him in Christianity, Judaism, or elsewhere—will have their place in the Kingdom: ‘each one shall be saved by his own righteousness.’ Judaism as such is sufficient for salvation. In practice, however, those who scorn Christ and his followers (and Justin understands this—rightly or wrongly—to have been institutionalized in Judaism by his time)<sup>65</sup> separate themselves from the spirit of their own tradition, just as any grave offence against the Mosaic Law would separate the perpetrator from the people. In the same way as, according to Tertullian, anyone who calls himself a Christian but lives in violation of the Christian law is a false Christian and ‘persons of this doubtful stamp do not assemble with us, neither do they belong to our communion: by their delinquency they become yours [ie. pagans] once more’.<sup>66</sup>



The continuity of the Jewish revelation is held in balance with the discontinuity that is necessitated by the eruption into the created order of a new revelation. The Jewish law remains efficacious (in principle at least) and the Jewish Scripture becomes Christian Scripture also. The continuity between these two traditions is such that Christianity may claim this venerable tradition, the ancient immensities of Judaism that surpass those of the Romans and even the Greeks, as its own.<sup>67</sup> The continuities and discontinuities between Judaism and Christianity are stated in principle by Tertullian; there is not, he states ‘any other contention between them and us, than that they believe the advent has not yet occurred’; but in all other respects, Christians do not ‘differ from the Jews concerning God.’<sup>68</sup> The simplicity of this statement, however, belies the complexity of its implications.

---

<sup>65</sup> See Krauss, ‘The Jews in the Works of the Church Fathers’: *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 5, no. 1, 1892, pp.130-134, also Boyarin, ‘Justin Martyr Invents Judaism’: *Church History* 70, no. 3, 2001, pp.428-437. According to Krauss, this accusation by Justin ‘is repeated by all the Fathers of the first four centuries’ (p.130). Boyarin believes that the earliest unequivocal evidence of such an institutionalised curse is of the mid third century (p.430).

<sup>66</sup> Tertullian, *ad nationes* (To the Nations), 1.5.

<sup>67</sup> Tertullian, *apol.*, 19. Tertullian counters the imperial persecution of Christians on this very issue. If the Roman religious customs are validated by their antiquity then this validation applies to the Christians also, and to a greater degree.

<sup>68</sup> Tertullian, *apol.*, 21.

Like Tertullian, Justin Martyr distinguishes between the efficacy of the Mosaic covenant before and the after the Incarnation but separating Judaism from Jews he presents the implication that Judaism is defunct not *de jure* but *de facto* and this because the Jews have betrayed their own tradition by refusing to recognise the fulfilment of their own expectations.

On the whole Christian tradition upholds the validity of Judaism, distancing itself from it only insofar as it seemed incompatible with the revelation of Christ. Thus Theophilus follows the haggadic exegeses of Scripture<sup>69</sup> and Jerome values the instruction of his Jewish teachers, without whom Christians can never know Scripture fully.<sup>70</sup> Justin Martyr may have—in at least one instance—rejected a polemically useful Christological reading of a certain part of Scripture in favour of the traditional Jewish one.<sup>71</sup> While demonstrating little explicit interest in Judaism, Clement of Alexandria extols the values of the esoteric meanings of Scripture that Christians had inherited from the Jewish prophets (a position shared by Eusebius<sup>72</sup>) and seems to have made unacknowledged use of Jewish sources, even adopting a Jewish interpretation of Genesis 15:5, rather than the christological interpretation current at his time.<sup>73</sup> Even those Fathers, such as Eusebius, who seem bitter and scornful of the Jews are indebted to the influence of Jewish belief and exegesis.<sup>74</sup> The extremes of Ignatius and Theophilus would, in hindsight, prove to be incompatible with the structure of the emerging Christian tradition suffering, as they do, by limiting the Person of Christ to His Incarnation and failing to perceive the cosmic functions and metacosmic nature of the *Logos*. This supra-

---

<sup>69</sup> 'For his exegesis Theophilus generally turns back to his Jewish or Jewish-Christian teachers. Almost everything in his exegesis can be paralleled in Jewish haggadic literature' (Grant, 'Theophilus of Antioch to Autolycus': *The Harvard Theological Review* 40, no. 4, 1947, p. 237; see also 234-242, 254-5).

<sup>70</sup> Krauss, 'The Jews in the Work of the Church Fathers VI': *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 6, no. 2, 1894; see especially pp.227-228. 'Jerome assumes that in Scriptural questions, every Jew, without exception, is competent to give satisfactory replies' (p.233).

<sup>71</sup> Krauss, 'The Jews in the Works of the Church Fathers': *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 5, no. 1, 1892, p.129. I do not share Krauss' reading here (Justin Martyr, *dial.*, 73) but as there is some ambiguity in the passage I have chosen to mention it as a possibility.

<sup>72</sup> See, for example *Praep. Ev.*, 9.5., cited in Krauss, 'The Jews in the Works of the Church Fathers IV': *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 6, no. 1, 1893, p.83.

<sup>73</sup> See Krauss, 'The Jews in the Works of the Church Fathers,' 1892, pp.134-39.

<sup>74</sup> Krauss, 'The Jews in the Works of the Church Fathers IV,' 1893, pp.82-83.

Incarnational vision of Christ would later be codified in the creeds as the work of the Holy Spirit, “who spoke through the prophets.”<sup>75</sup>

### Moses Speaking Greek?

“So God created man,” It is not “They made.” Here Scripture avoids the plurality of the Persons. After having enlightened the Jew, it dissipates the error of the Gentiles in putting itself under the shelter of unity...<sup>76</sup>

The continuity between Judaism and the new revelation of Christianity was of grave concern to the early Church; equally so, Gentile Christians were concerned to understand a continuity between their Greek heritage and the new faith. If second Temple Judaism was disintegrating by the time of Christ, the pagan world was no doubt in worse shape.<sup>77</sup> As Schuon observes, Christianity, at its beginning, ‘was confronted with a religion valid in itself, but nonetheless decadent in more than one respect.’<sup>78</sup> The intellectual life of the Empire had become disconnected from its cultic life; philosophy had ceased to be grounded in spiritual or intellectual perception and become increasingly worldly, rationalistic, and abstracted from human realities. The arts of rhetoric had become dislocated from Truth and turned to serve political self interest. Clement of Alexandria (c.150–c. 215) echoes Socrates when he warned:

... the art of sophistry, which the Greeks cultivated, is a fantastic power, which makes false opinions like true by means of words. For it produces rhetoric in order to persuasion, and disputation for wrangling. These arts, therefore, if not conjoined with philosophy, will be injurious to every one.<sup>79</sup>

---

<sup>75</sup> Compare St Augustine, *In Ps.* 99.9. ‘He who first spoke out of the cloudy pillar, hath in Person spoken unto us in His footstool; that is, on earth, when He had assumed the flesh... He Himself used to speak out of the cloud, which was not then understood: He hath spoken in His own footstool, and the words of His cloud have been understood.’

<sup>76</sup> St. Basil, *Hexa.*, 9.6.

<sup>77</sup> The following is a brief overview and, of necessity, we have passed silently over certain details. It is, however, the general ambience which gave rise to the Christian response that is of interest to us here.

<sup>78</sup> Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*, 1982, p.120.

<sup>79</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *stromateis* (Miscellany) 1.8.

Roman religion became increasingly superstitious and syncretic as it sought to adapt to the cosmopolitan Empire. For Tertullian the Greco-Roman pantheon had had a certain integrity, but the arbitrary absorption of the Egyptian, Parthian and Persian gods was a sign of the loss of true religion:

What need had they of uncertain gods, when they possessed certain ones? ... as they had certain gods, they ought to have been contented with them, without requiring select ones. In this want they are even found to be irreligious! For if gods are selected as onions are, then such as are not chosen are declared to be worthless.<sup>80</sup>

The adoption of new gods implies a lack in the native system. Rome had previously resisted the arrival of foreign pantheons and attempted to preserve its own cultic and moral integrity but this was no longer the case. The mystery cults had lost coherence; old gods were revived with little understanding and new gods compromised the cultus of the Greco-Roman world. In response to these conditions Tertullian addressed the Romans thus:

The laws... your fathers in their wisdom had enacted concerning the very gods themselves, you their most loyal children have rescinded. The consuls, by the authority of the senate, banished Father Bacchus and his mysteries not merely from the city, but from the whole of Italy. The consuls Piso and Gabinius, no Christians surely, forbade Serapis, and Isis, and Arpocrates, with their dogheaded friend, admission into the Capitol—in the act casting them out from the assembly of the gods—overthrew their altars, and expelled them from the country, being anxious to prevent the vices of their base and lascivious religion from spreading. These, you have restored, and conferred highest honours on them.<sup>81</sup>

Deprived of its traditional cosmological foundation the Hellenic culture of the later Empire degenerated into emperor worship. While this provided the expanding Empire a cultic cohesion religious life was increasingly directed by the interests of the state: priesthoods became political offices

---

<sup>80</sup> Tertullian, *ad nat.*, 2.9.

<sup>81</sup> Tertullian, *apologeticum* (Apology) 6.

rather than spiritual ones. Judaism and Christianity were persecuted precisely because they refused to compromise themselves in the interests of the Empire. Schuon offers the following revealing observation on this period:

... we would say that in the clash between nascent Christianity and the Greco-Roman world, a *bhakti* at the height of its vitality encountered a *jnâna* in full decadence; on the whole at least and excepting the initiatic mysteries and Neoplatonism.<sup>82</sup>

The native Greek mysteries, especially those of Eleusis, seem to have preserved their integrity and indeed the greatest flowering of Neoplatonism, Plotinus, was still to come. Neither, however, could reverse the general decline. The Eleusinian Mysteries presupposed the traditional ambience that was already reduced to a remnant and Neoplatonism was only nominally and allegorically connected to the gods, a spiritual science rather than a religion, a kernel without a shell. Herein lies the danger of Neoplatonism: it was, in effect, Intellection without Revelation. For Tertullian, Revelation is, in practice but not in principle, superior to Intellection. He asserts the value of Intellection by which the soul can apprehend God yet adds: 'But, that we might attain an ampler and more authoritative knowledge at once of Himself, and of His counsels and will, God has added a written revelation.'<sup>83</sup> Intellection is efficacious but not foolproof. Schuon:

Fallen man, and thus the average man, is as it were poisoned by the passional element, either grossly or subtly; from this results an obscuring of the Intellect and the necessity of a Revelation coming from the outside. Remove the passional element from the soul and from the intelligence—remove “the rust from the mirror” or “from the heart”—and the Intellect will be released; it will reveal from within what religion reveals from without.<sup>84</sup>



---

<sup>82</sup> Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*, 1982, p.127.

<sup>83</sup> Tertullian, *apol.*, 18.

<sup>84</sup> Schuon, *Esotericism as Principle and as Way*, Bedfont: Perennial Books, 1981, p.20.

Regarding the gods of the ancient world, the apologists are clear: they are idols (εἰδωλα), ‘the works of men’s hands and unclean demons (ἔργα χειρῶν ἀνθρώπων καὶ δαιμόνια ἀκάθαρτα).’ They are not merely “wrong” but dangerous: ‘And such may all those become who make them and put their trust in them!’<sup>85</sup> Van Winden observes that Christians commonly identified the gods of the pagan world with fallen angels.<sup>86</sup> Theophilus, Tertullian, Justin Martyr and Clement (amongst others) all make this claim. The intent of the fallen angels, as Van Winden explains, ‘was to divert mankind from its destiny by drawing to themselves human worship which was due to God and to Him alone.’<sup>87</sup> In his *Dialogue*, Justin asserts: “‘And when I hear, Trypho,” said I, “that Perseus was begotten of a virgin, I understand that the deceiving serpent counterfeited also this”’;<sup>88</sup> elsewhere he states:

... for having heard it proclaimed through the prophets that the Christ was to come, and that the ungodly among men were to be punished by fire, they [wicked demons] put forward many to be called sons of Jupiter, under the impression that they would be able to produce in men the idea that the things which were said with regard to Christ were mere marvellous tales, like the things which were said by the poets.<sup>89</sup>

Tertullian, Justin and Theophilus also understand the gods euhemeristically, noting that certain of the gods are, according to their mythologies, deified men.<sup>90</sup> Of course, the Imperial cult is the glaring example, and one that the Apologists often disparage for its banality and novelty. Many early Christian martyrs were martyred precisely because they refused to pay homage to the deified Emperors.<sup>91</sup> The gods, it is claimed, simply do not exist but the worship offered them is perpetuated and diverted by the fallen angels and

---

<sup>85</sup> Theophilus of Antioch, *Autol.*, 1.10.

<sup>86</sup> Van Winden, ‘Idolum and Idolatria in Tertullian’: *Vigiliae Christianae* 36, no. 2, 1982, p.109-110. See also Bauckham, ‘The Fall of the Angels as the Source of Philosophy in Hermias and Clement of Alexandria’: *Vigiliae Christianae* 39, no. 4, 1985.

<sup>87</sup> Van Winden, ‘Idolum and Idolatria in Tertullian,’ 1982, p.110.

<sup>88</sup> Justin Martyr, *dial.*, 70.

<sup>89</sup> Justin Martyr, *I apologia* (1 Apology) 54.

<sup>90</sup> Theophilus of Antioch, *Autol.*, 1.10; Tertullian, *de idololatria* (On Idolatry) 15; Tertullian, *ad nat.*, 2.12-14; Justin Martyr, *cohortatio ad Graecos* (Hortatory Address to the Greeks) 16.

<sup>91</sup> See, for example, Tertullian, *ad nat.*, 1.17.



their demonic progeny away from God and towards themselves.<sup>92</sup> To this end, they offer counterfeits and parodies of Truth, giving falsehood the appearance of truth and leading man, without his knowledge, away from God.<sup>93</sup> This understanding originates in the Enochian tradition and was adopted by Christianity from Jewish Apologists.<sup>94</sup>



The dislocation of intellectual life from religious practice in the later Empire, while detrimental to the pagan world, made it possible for the Church Fathers to evaluate the Greco-Roman philosophy and religion separately. As a result, the Church was able to accommodate the insights of philosophy into its own spiritual vision while rejecting the pantheons of gods in favour of its own monotheistic *theōria*. Moreover, Greco-Roman philosophy tended to reject the mythological gods and was therefore an unexpected ally.

In his *Timaeus*, Plato traces primordial knowledge to Egypt, whose culture remained continuous with the primordial state of man. To this Justin Martyr adds:

...your most renowned historian Diodorus ... travelled over both Asia and Europe for the sake of great accuracy, and thus became an eye-witness of very many things... [He] wrote of [Moses] in these very words: "For subsequent to the ancient manner of living in Egypt which gods and heroes are fabled to have regulated, they say that Moses first persuaded the people to use written laws, and to live by them..."<sup>95</sup>

According to the Apologists, if Pythagoras and Plato brought Egyptian *gnosis* to Greece, the Egyptians themselves had received it from the revelation of the Judeo-Christian God to Moses. Justin Martyr claimed that Plato 'accepted, as is likely, the doctrine of Moses and the other prophets regarding the one God, which he learned while in Egypt' yet feared that he might suffer the same fate as Socrates and veiled his knowledge.<sup>96</sup> While

---

<sup>92</sup> Tertullian, *apol.*, 12.

<sup>93</sup> Justin Martyr, *2 apologia* (2 Apology) 5.

<sup>94</sup> Bauckham, 'The Fall of the Angels as the Source of Philosophy,' 1985, p. 320.

<sup>95</sup> Justin Martyr, *coh. Gr.*, 9.

<sup>96</sup> Justin Martyr, *coh. Gr.*, 20.

this means that he did not communicate the whole prophetic truth, he nevertheless gave veiled intimations of the Mosaic wisdom to which he had been exposed. Plato's knowledge of the God of Abraham and his prophets is a claim Justin returns to many times, championing Plato's *Timaeus*, for example, as inspired by the first book of Moses.

After his conversion to Christianity, Justin would continue to wear the characteristic robe of the philosopher; in his mind, the two were entirely compatible. Theophilus is less sympathetic: he asserts that the philosophers contradicted one another and themselves.<sup>97</sup> He accuses the Hellenic philosophical tradition of a lack of internal integrity and overall coherence: its intellectual vision had been mixed with and distorted by ratio-cinative speculation. Philosophy had splintered into disparate schools, having no real common denominator and only the name "philosophy" to connect them: a syncretism of false opinions but also partial truths.<sup>98</sup>

For Justin Martyr the Abrahamic tradition had been passed by mundane means to the Gentile world, where it was largely suppressed by cowardly philosophers who disguised the truth revealed to them. However, Justin also envisaged a transmission of knowledge that was beyond the historical and horizontal and was rather mystical and vertical.

For whatever either lawgivers or philosophers uttered well, they elaborated by finding and contemplating (εὐρέσεως καὶ θεωρίας) some part of the Word (λόγος). But since they did not know the whole of the Word (λόγος), which is Christ, they often contradicted themselves. Those who by human birth were more ancient than Christ, when they attempted to consider and prove things by reason (λόγος), were brought before the tribunals as impious persons and busybodies.<sup>99</sup>

Socrates, he claims,

---

<sup>97</sup> Theophilus of Antioch, *Autol.*, 3.3. As if this phenomenon does not also manifest amongst Christian thinkers!

<sup>98</sup> Cf. Irenaeus on the Valentiniacs: '[The Valentiniacs] bring together the things which have been said by all those who were ignorant of God, and who are termed philosophers; and sewing together, as it were, a motley garment out of a heap of miserable rags, they have, by their subtle manner of expression, furnished themselves with a cloak which is really not their own. They do, it is true, introduce a new kind of doctrine, inasmuch as by a new sort of art it has been substituted [for the old]. Yet it is in reality both old and useless, since these very opinions have been sewed together out of ancient dogmas redolent of ignorance and irreligion' (*adversus haereses* 2.14.2).

<sup>99</sup> Justin Martyr, 2 *apologia* (2 Apology). 10.

taught men to reject the wicked demons and those who did the things which the poets related; and he exhorted them to become acquainted with the God who was to them unknown, by means of the investigation of reason (διὰ λόγου), saying, "That it is neither easy to find the Father and Maker of all, nor, having found Him, is it safe to declare Him to all."<sup>100</sup>

The possibility of partial *gnosis* is innate to the human condition 'for He was and is the Word who is in every man, and who foretold the things that were to come to pass both through the prophets and in His own person'.<sup>101</sup> A mystical *theōria* or intellective vision of the *Logos* is possible because Christ, the *Logos*, is 'the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.'<sup>102</sup> The *logos* in man corresponds to the *Logos* who is Christ. It is the spiritual or intellectual organ whereby one may perceive the divine light and is intrinsic to human nature. All peoples of all races and times possessed it. Tertullian:

... whenever the soul comes to itself, as out of a surfeit, or a sleep, or a sickness, and attains something of its natural soundness, it speaks of God; ... O noble testimony of the soul by nature Christian!<sup>103</sup>

Christ the *Logos*, as uncreated God, is eternal and hence Real outside of and prior to the Incarnation. Consequentially, those who lived prior to the Incarnation—a relatively recent event in the history of religion—were not bereft of Truth. Christ's salvific economy is not confined to the Incarnation; it is grander and more expansive, encompassing the whole of the created order, *amongst* and *in* all men as revelation and intellection respectively. Justin Martyr:

He is the Word (Λόγος) of whom every race of men were partakers; and those who lived reasonably are Christians, even though they have been thought atheists; as, among the Greeks, Socrates and Heraclitus...<sup>104</sup>

---

<sup>100</sup> Justin Martyr, *2 apol.*, 10.

<sup>101</sup> Justin Martyr, *2 apol.*, 10.

<sup>102</sup> John 1:9.

<sup>103</sup> Tertullian, *apol.*, 17.

<sup>104</sup> Justin Martyr, *1 apol.*, 55.

For each man spoke well in proportion to the share he had of the spermatic word (τοῦ σπερματικοῦ θείου λόγου),<sup>105</sup> ... Whatever things were rightly said among all men, are the property of us Christians. ... For all the writers were able to see realities darkly through the sowing of the implanted word that was in them.<sup>106</sup>



Clement of Alexandria offers a positive view of philosophy. Philosophy, says Clement, ‘does not ruin life by being the originator of false practices and base deeds, although some have calumniated it, though it be the clear image of truth, a divine gift to the Greeks’.<sup>107</sup> By “philosophy” he means only that which is true amongst the various philosophical schools.

I do not mean the Stoic, or the Platonic, or the Epicurean, or the Aristotelian, but whatever has been well said by each of those sects... this eclectic whole I call philosophy. But such conclusions of human reasonings, as men have cut away and falsified, I would never call divine.<sup>108</sup>

For Clement, philosophy was provided to the Greeks by God as a preparation for the Christian Revelation in the same way that Judaism prepared the Jews for the Incarnation of the Word.

Accordingly, before the advent of the Lord, philosophy was necessary to the Greeks for righteousness. And now it becomes conducive to piety; being a kind of preparatory training to those who attain to faith through demonstration. ... For God is the cause of all good things; but of some primarily, as of the Old and the New Testament; and of others by consequence, as philosophy. Perchance, too, philosophy was given to the Greeks directly and primarily, till the Lord should call the Greeks.<sup>109</sup>

---

<sup>105</sup> Literally, “The spermatic Word of God.”

<sup>106</sup> Justin Martyr, *2 apol.*, 13.

<sup>107</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *str.*, 1.2.

<sup>108</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *str.*, 1.7.

<sup>109</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *str.*, 1.5. He continues: ‘For this was a schoolmaster to bring “the Hellenic mind,” as the law brings the Hebrews, to Christ.’

Philosophy prepares and supports the intellectual human temperament for the Christian revelation, paving the way by “demonstration” for the faith that is its climax and perfection. The truth that philosophy seeks is the truth of which the Lord Himself said, “I am the truth” and it ‘exercises the mind, rouses the intelligence, and begets an inquiring shrewdness, by means of the true philosophy, which the initiated possess, having found it, or rather received it, from the truth itself.’<sup>110</sup> True philosophy is the inheritance of the initiated. In other words, it must be connected to an orthodox religious tradition.

Clement understands not just Greek philosophy but Greek culture as preparatory for the Gospel. His position is not, however, uncritical.

The Greek preparatory culture, therefore, with philosophy itself, is shown to have come down from God to men, not with a definite direction but in the way in which showers fall down on the good land, and on the dunghill, and on the houses. ... But they have not the same grace as those which spring up in rich soil, in as much as they are withered or plucked up.<sup>111</sup>

Philosophy is not innately flawed but has only become so over the course of time. Its source is divine but it does not bind man to God in the religious sense, as does a Revelation. Preparatory for the Gospel, philosophy is incomplete without it.<sup>112</sup> Philosophy is a ray of the divine light, but one that has been severed from its source and fragmented by the Promethean exercise of human reason (distinct from and inferior to the Intellect).

... just as the Bacchantes tore asunder the limbs of Pentheus, so the sects both of barbarian and Hellenic philosophy have done with truth, and each vaunts as the whole truth the portion which has fallen to its lot.<sup>113</sup>



---

<sup>110</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *str.*, 1.5.

<sup>111</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *str.*, 1.7.

<sup>112</sup> Such an hierarchical vision of *gnosis* is also present in Philo Judaeus, again in an Enochian context: see *de gigantibus* (On the Giants) 13 (58-61).

<sup>113</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *str.*, 1.13.

Generally speaking, Tertullian gives ‘positive assessments of the culture of classical antiquity.’<sup>114</sup> He was, from his early years, a student of Stoicism and valued, for example, the work of Seneca the Younger (c.4 BC–65 AD) ‘whom we so often find on our side.’<sup>115</sup> Tertullian was involved in a synthesizing of Christian revelation and Greco-Roman philosophy but was extremely cautious in how he proceeded. Heresy, he claims, springs from pagan philosophy.

Indeed heresies are themselves instigated by philosophy. From this source came the Aeons, and I known not what infinite forms, and the trinity of man in the system of Valentinus, who was of Plato’s school. From the same source came Marcion’s better god, with all his tranquillity; he came of the Stoics. Then, again, the opinion that the soul dies is held by the Epicureans; while the denial of the restoration of the body is taken from the aggregate school of all the philosophers; also, when matter is made equal to God, then you have the teaching of Zeno; and when any doctrine is alleged touching a god of fire, then Heraclitus comes in. The same subject-matter is discussed over and over again by the heretics and the philosophers; the same arguments are involved.<sup>116</sup>

Forced to choose between the world-denying dualism of Marcion and the pantheism espoused by some philosophers, Tertullian chose the latter as the least erroneous. He writes:

... the majority of the philosophers hesitated to assign a beginning and an end to the... world, lest its constituent elements, great as they undoubtedly are, should fail to be regarded as divine... It is, indeed, enough for me that natural elements, foremost in site and state, should have been more readily regarded as divine than as unworthy of God.<sup>117</sup>

It is not philosophy itself that cause error but its misapplication. Tertullian objects to the use of philosophy as a criterion of the truth of Revelation. Instead, Revelation must be used as the criterion to evaluate the truth of philosophy. Christian philosophers were, according to Tertullian, ‘intent on making Christianity philosophically respectable. Making Christ

---

<sup>114</sup> Kaufman, ‘Tertullian on Heresy,’ 1991, p.170.

<sup>115</sup> Tertullian, *de anima* (On the Soul) 20.

<sup>116</sup> Tertullian, *de praescriptione haereticorum* (The Prescription Against Heresies) 20.

<sup>117</sup> Tertullian, *adv. Marc.*, 1.13.

reasonable and respectable, however, Christian philosophers often made themselves heretics.<sup>118</sup> Philosophy must, to use a well known phrase, be “the handmaid of theology” and not the other way around: Revelation has priority as the criterion of truth and philosophy must be adapted to it. Attempts to interpret and evaluate Scripture philosophically lead to heresy. Scripture has no need of philosophy for its interpretation: it provides its own hermeneutic tools and difficult passages can be understood by reference to other, thematically similar, passages. When Scripture is taken as a whole it interprets itself.<sup>119</sup> Philosophy must, in its incorporation to Christianity, be re-formed in accordance with the principles of truth revealed in Scripture. Thus Tertullian famously proclaimed:

What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? what between heretics and Christians? Our instruction comes from “the porch of Solomon,” who had himself taught that “the Lord should be sought in simplicity of heart.” Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition!<sup>120</sup>

The truths revealed in the Christian Revelation must be taken axiomatically. Faith in the external manifestation of the divine leads to its confirmation by the Intellect, God’s interior manifestation, the “dowry of the soul.” Only when the soul is submitted to the “yoke of heaven” does it, in St Augustine’s words, ‘become worthy of knowing what [it] believe[s].’<sup>121</sup>

## Conclusion

“By their fruits ye shall know them.”

The fruits of the Christian synthesis of Jewish and Greek wisdom are many and varied. Jewish modes of knowledge and worship informed that of their Christian brothers and sisters, but so did the symbolic forms of the mystery religions prevalent in the Hellenic world in the first Christian centuries.

---

<sup>118</sup> Kaufman, ‘Tertullian on Heresy,’ 1991, p.170.

<sup>119</sup> Kaufman, ‘Tertullian on Heresy,’ 1991, pp.171-72.

<sup>120</sup> Tertullian, *de praescriptione haereticorum* (The Prescription Against Heresies) 7.

<sup>121</sup> St Augustine, *de moribus ecclesiae catholicae* (Of the Morals of the Catholic Church) 20.

Jewish realism mitigated the Hellenic tendency to abstraction and the Jewish allegiance to Truth railed against the philosophy that had become, in too many cases, sophistry.

Christianity finds a valid synthesis of the Jewish and Greco-Roman cultures amidst the turmoil of its first centuries. Christianity was, for the most part, able to assimilate elements of Jewish and Gentile cultures valuable to itself without compromising its own structural and symbolic integrity. In the creative tension of continuities and discontinuities that this required, a vision of the divine salvific economy emerged that was universal in its principles and discerning in its applications. By insisting on the Revelation as the principle criterion of Truth, Christianity was able to correct and incorporate into itself the intellectual life of the Greco-Roman civilization and reconnect it to a revealed religious tradition. In doing so, it would provide the Empire with the spiritual cohesion that it had lost. At the same time, Christianity was able to acknowledge its Jewish heritage without being bound by it and becoming simply another of the many Jewish sects.

The ante-Nicene insights of the *religio perennis* were not suppressed by the emerging orthodoxy and creedal formulations of the imperial Church but continue down through the ages. In the fifth century, St Augustine of Hippo, one of the most influential Christian thinkers of all time, famously wrote as he summed up the content of his life's work:

For that thing itself, which is now called the Christian religion, used to exist and was not lacking amongst the ancients from the beginning of the human race until Christ himself came in the flesh, from which time the true religion began to be called "Christian." And after his resurrection and ascension into heaven, the Apostles had begun to proclaim him, and many believed; first in Antioch (as it is written) the disciples were called "Christians." Therefore I have said: 'This is the Christian religion in our time,' not because it did not exist previously, but because it received this name in later times.<sup>122</sup>

---

<sup>122</sup> *'Nam res ipsa, quae nunc christiana religio nuncupatur, erat et apud antiquos nec defuit ab initio generis humani, quo- usque ipse Christus veniret in carne, unde vera religio, quae iam erat, coepit appellari christiana. Cum enim eum post resurrectionem ascensionemque in caelum coepissent Apostoli praedicare, et plurimi crederent, primum apud Antiochiam, sicut scriptum est, appellati sunt discipuli "Christiani." Propterea dixi: Haec est nostris temporibus christiana religio, non quia prioribus temporibus non fuit, sed quia posterioribus hoc nomen accepit.'* St Augustine of Hippo, *Retractationes*, 1.13.3. (PL 32.) My translation. In quoting the first part



The *religio perennis* (in various forms and considering the Western tradition only) is also expounded by St Ambrose (c.338–397, another “Doctor of the Church”) and through the centuries by Hugh of St Victor (c.1078–1141), St Thomas Aquinas (c.1225–1274), and Meister Eckhart (1260–1328), Johannes Tauler (1300–1361) and Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464) amongst others. Although this idea was condemned by the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) and the Council of Florence (1442),<sup>123</sup> by the 16<sup>th</sup> century the *religio perennis* was again under consideration and authorised by the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s. Underutilised and often ignored or refuted, the *religio perennis* is nevertheless an essential aspect of the Christian vision with a distinguished lineage. It is not a novelty introduced into the faith but an ancient vision essential to an orthodox Christology.

Recognising man’s inherent spiritual or intellectual capacity to perceive the Divine, Christianity recognised the presence of Christ in all men. Revealed fully in the Incarnation, Christ was nevertheless present outside of the formal Christian economy. In coming to comprehend the nature of its own Revelation, Christianity would discern the divine presence of Christ outside of the formal bounds of the Church and hence arrive at a vision of Christ’s salvific economy that encompasses all of creation. Consequentially, the vision of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ extends beyond the bounds of the formal *ecclesia*. At the heart of the Christian tradition lies a vision of the *religio perennis* that is a necessary corollary of the nature of Christ himself. Like all religions, Christianity perceives its own metaphysic as the fullest and most perfect possible but at the same time it recognises the presence of the One God at the heart of other religious visions and the righteous amongst them as members of the Mystical Body of Christ and denizens of the Kingdom of Heaven.

---

of this passage, Ananda Coomaraswamy remarks ‘Had he not retracted these brave words, the bloodstained history of Christianity might have been otherwise written!’ (*Am I My Brother’s Keeper?* p.46) and this is repeated by Whittall Perry in his *Treasury of Traditional Wisdom* (p.793). This understanding of Augustine’s *Retractationes* is, however, mistaken: the treatise is not a ‘retraction’ as the English title would suggest, but a summary or revisiting, as the latin *retractationes* makes clear. In this work, composed four years before his death, Augustine looks back over his life’s work and presents an overview and ‘fine tuning’ of his works and their teachings. 1.13 summarises his work *de vera religione* (On True Religion) and the passage here, 1.13.3, rearticulates and clarifies *de ver. relig.*, 10.19. Far from a “retraction” in the English sense, it is a reaffirmation!

<sup>123</sup> Both, of course, Roman Catholic councils rather than ecumenical councils.