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# 1 Christian argument

The present movement of Western civilisation away from Christianity has directed attention to earlier days when Christians were a small part of a Roman world of pluralistic beliefs;[1] they came before, we come after, Christendom. Claims for relevance, however, are always competitive and need to be argued. What drives twentieth-century Western man back to the second and third centuries? Initially there is little more than a vague feeling that Christendom was a mistake, that ecumenical councils in the fourth and fifth centuries achieved less than they claimed, that the classical dogmatic formulations are too ambiguous to be helpful. Clearly this response is not enough. Christendom was not an unqualified mistake and its assessment is the task of a lifetime and not of an impulse. The best ecumenical councils may well be those that seem to achieve little; ambiguity of creeds and councils invites further analysis before resignation.

The importance of the second century and the apologists is best seen in the emergence of Christian argument;[2] but Christians have argued about so many strange things that the area of argument is important. The claim of the enthusiast for early Christian thought is that the problems that Christians faced in a pluralistic world, then, have a close relation to those that they face now: the problems were more general and more philosophical (Is there one God? Can man speak of him? Is man free? Why is there evil in God's world?) than the dogmatic issues of the fourth and fifth centuries. To claim that Christian philosophy begins here in the second century is simply to indicate this fact; it does not mean either that the writings to be discussed were uniformly philosophical or that something like a 'system' of philosophy emerged. The problems were those commonly called philosophical and the problems are what count. For 'the philosopher – unless he be a very bad phil-

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[1] H. I. Marrou (ed.), *A Diognète*, SC (Paris, 1951), p. 176; H. Butterfield, *Christianity and history* (London, 1954), p. 135.

[2] F. D. Maurice, *Lectures on the ecclesiastical history of the first and second centuries* (Cambridge, 1854), p. 207.

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osopher – does not set out to construct a system; what he is trying to do is to solve problems'.[1] Where did second-century problems originate? There were four main sources that presented objections and difficulties.

The most immediate objection to Christianity was that of the State and its religion. Christians refused to fulfil the religious duties that were required of every citizen: they were atheists who could not be trusted if the State hoped for security and permanence. The Roman Empire exercised a benign tolerance towards the religion of a conquered nation. Any country might worship its gods, provided it added an allegiance to the gods who had made Rome great and whose protection was a condition of Rome's continued eminence. Christians failed to meet the required conditions. Their religion was not a local cult tied to a particular country, for they were now to be found in most parts of the empire. Nor could they claim to preserve the faith of their fathers and beg respect for their cultural heritage. They had all deserted the faith of their fathers. Their exclusiveness was their major crime; and their newness closed the loophole through which the Jews were for a time allowed to be exclusive on grounds of ancient allegiance.

Newness was an offence to philosophers too: Celsus, the Platonist, argued that what was true must be old, and what was new could not be true.[2] Any idea had to prove its antiquity to gain acceptance. Wisdom lay at the beginning of man's history, and had stood the test of time. Christians joined their novelty to a ridiculous demand for faith; they denied reason and attracted the irrational masses because they offered quick returns for the credulous. Stoics, like Marcus Aurelius, found Christians theatrical in their attitude to death,[3] and not worthy of consideration in their beliefs. Lucian had little time for philosophical claims. As a cynic he saw the variety of philosophical theories as an immediate proof of their futility. The absolute claims of Christians were a sign of their credulity rather than their credibility.[4]

[1] John Passmore, 'The idea of a history of philosophy', *HThS* 5 (1965), 27.

[2] Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 7.71. See C. Andresen, *Logos und Nomos* (Berlin, 1955), pp. 146ff, and H. Dörrie, in a review of Andresen, *Gn.*, 29 (1957), 195; 'Der Logos ist alt, weil er wahr ist'.

[3] M. Aurelius, *Meditations*, 8.51; 11.3.

[4] Lucian, *Peregrinus*, 11–13; cf. Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 1.9.

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The Jews saw the gulf between them and the Christians widen during the second century as Jewish influence faded. At the personal level, they had supported persecution of Christians and at the theoretical level they saw no ground for this new heresy taking over the writings that belonged to the Jewish people. There was no integrity in the Christian claim, for Christians did not keep the Law, and they placed an object of shame, the cross, in the centre of their life and worship. Argument between Christian and Jew could range over the whole of the scriptures that each claimed as his own and could vary according to the method of interpretation that was used.

Finally, Christians had to argue then, as ever, more with one another than with anyone else. It is wrong to imagine a small select band, unanimous in belief, scattered through the world, fighting the three enemies we have mentioned. Christianity in the second century was torn and divided.[1] The divisions were not superficial but were concerned with fundamental points of belief. Each main centre of Christianity had its distinctive approach, but there were few centres where some divisions could not be found. Gnosticism is the name given to the most powerful force for Christian disunity. Beginning outside Christianity, it offered a higher Christian way, which could be found in simple modifications, as in the Gospel of Truth and the Gospel of Thomas, or in elaborate systems like those described without sympathy by Irenaeus and Hippolytus. Yet, for all the strength of Gnosticism, a more fundamental threat lay in the belief of Marcion. For Marcion was deeply sensitive to the wonder of the gospel; because he saw the amazing grace offered by the father of Jesus Christ, he rejected the world as God's creation, and human history, especially Jewish history, as God's activity. Both these rejections were reasonable and were prompted by honesty and sensitivity. Yet he was wrong, and Christians knew that the rejection of the creator and of the God of Abraham would be fatal to the understanding of Christian truth. A lot of argument was necessary before a clear pattern of

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[1] See W. Bauer, *Orthodoxy and heresy in earliest Christianity*, ET of 2nd edition, edited by G. Strecker (Philadelphia, 1971). On p. xi, G. Strecker summarises Bauer's thesis: 'In earliest Christianity, orthodoxy and heresy do not stand in relation to one another as primary to secondary, but in many regions heresy is the original manifestation of Christianity.'

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Christian truth could be found throughout the Church universal. But the way was through argument, whether the threat came from Gnosticism or Marcion, just as the way to answer the Roman state, philosophers and Jews could only be through reasoning and evidence.

Five areas may be selected as central to the widespread and many-sided debate.[1] Christians had to argue about God, that he was both real and transcendent, and that he was one. They had to argue about man, that he, for all his sinfulness, was bound to God by a likeness that could grow by grace into sonship. The world had to be defended and made rational; it had one cause, and its evils were not due to that cause but to the sin that man freely chose. History had to be made coherent around a divine purpose that was fulfilled in Jesus. Finally, the strangest thing of all was the belief that the one supreme God had become man in Jesus; yet, without this belief, Christians could believe neither in the God above, nor in man's restoration to God, nor in the goodness of the creator, nor in the unity of history. We shall look at these five areas and the aspect that they presented to each of the four groups in the Christian environment.[2]

## 1 The God above

The problems about the Christian God may be broken up into four main questions:

(i) Is there one God and can one speak of him?
(ii) Is God good?
(iii) Can God be three as well as one?
(iv) Is God best understood as the first cause?

Does the God of the Christians make sense? Is there one

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[1] The five problems are not an exhaustive list; other important problems include the interpretation of scripture, the understanding of the Church, the nature of the *eschaton*.

[2] There were always Christians who did not argue and who provided ground for sceptical jeers; but they had little to offer in the fight for Christian survival. Their influence was inhibited by the catechetical instruction that was obligatory before baptism. It became harder for Christians to be ignorant of their faith. Heresy was at once seductive and disruptive; more and more Christianity became a doctrine or a philosophy.

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supreme transcendent ineffable being who is different from everything else, and yet stands in sovereign majesty over all things? This God cannot be spoken of in ordinary language, but requires qualifications whenever concrete terms are used of him. Most Jews had no problem with such a God, because their God had always been above the ways of men, and because some of them had already learnt to talk in terms of Greek philosophy. The philosophers of the persuasion of Plato were ready to speak of God in negative, transcendent terms: he was to be grasped by intellectual vision and not handled or touched. Only the established religion of the day had little time for this remote and negative being. The gods of Greece and Rome were human, lively beings who got into all sorts of mischief and who left many tales of their adventures. There were other gods too, more shadowy and less colourful characters, who inhabited familiar parts of this world. Heretics, like the Gnostics, looked to a supreme God who was even more remote than the God of the Christians, Jews or philosophers; their God could not have anything to do with the world of men. Philosophy could become the chief ally on this point, but the problem remained acute. The notion of one supreme being did not come easily to the ancient world. Alexander Severus was happy to add an image of Christ to his collection of other images,[1] but he did not seem to see any point in either transcendence or exclusive unity. The God above was too remote to be useful; in words of a later day, Christians and the birds could have the heavens, provided they left the earth to others.[2]

## 2 Man and his freedom

- (i) In what way is man related to God?
- (ii) How can man's present misery be reconciled with his divine origin?
- (iii) Is man free?
- (iv) Of what does man consist?

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[1] Lampridius, *Life of Alexander Severus*, 43.

[2] 'Did not the Nazis carry on their fight against us with the slogan: "Heaven for sparrows and Christians, earth for us"?' (E. Käsemann, *Jesus means freedom*, ET [London, 1969], p. 134).

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(i.e., Has he parts such as body, soul and spirit and, if so, how are they related?)
(v) Can man know the truth?

Christians claimed that it was possible for God by his Spirit to live in man and to direct man's life. Man was made in God's image and however scarred the image might be, it could be restored to the likeness of God. God was near man and whoever belonged to Christ had his Spirit within. Oddly enough this was the one part of Christian belief that met little real opposition. The Jews were prepared to acknowledge God's image in man and the presence of his Spirit in the prophets. The philosophers saw the reason of man as his divine part, while the pagan religions had various ways of joining the human and divine. The Gnostics would allow some men to possess a divine spark, but denied that the spark could be found in all or that it was due to anything but an inscrutable decree.

The bridge between man and God was a subject of constant attention. Christians wanted to cut this bridge and yet to replace it with so many new bridges that God was closer than ever. God was not to be found in any of the sacred places that men had fondly frequented. Yet he was to be found in every human heart and to be known as father by every man who turned to him in faith. The optimism of this account of man made worship of any material thing in heaven or earth absurd. Sun, Moon and stars would not wish to bring man down to their level but would refer him on to God.[1]

## 3 The world and its maker

(i) Is the world created by the one supreme God?
(ii) What has happened to make parts of the world so unlike their creator?
(iii) Where in the world can God's hand be seen?
(iv) Is evil in the world compatible with its divine maker?

Christians claimed that the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ was the creator of all things in heaven and in earth. He was good, despite the evil in the world that he had made. Only

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[1] Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 5.11; *Exhortation to martyrdom*, 7.

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the Jews accepted this belief without objection. Some philosophers could not reconcile the presence of evil with the idea of a good, all-powerful Cause. Platonists and Stoics had ways of tackling the problem. The pagans allowed for many gods to produce the many things in a varied world. Supremely, Marcion and the Gnostics came out against this point. The most high God could not be responsible for the limitations, bestiality and suffering of this depraved world. Only an inferior and limited creator could have made the world in which men live. To them the reply was given: the one cause of all things was the ground of the world's order and rationality. Man could make the world his home because God ruled over it. Evil was real but it came from God's goodness in allowing man to be free. Every evil thing could be traced to sin, to the free choice of men or angels.

## 4 History and continuity

(i) Is there continuity in history? Why did Jesus come so late?
(ii) Has history a centre?
(iii) Where do we stand in history now?
(iv) Does man make progress in the course of history?
(v) How will it all end?

None of the four groups could accept the unified view of history that the Christians gave. The Jews could not see their history continued in the Church, and the philosophers could not attribute any great significance to history (for the Stoics it went round in circles). The pagans denied any unity of divine activity, the Gnostics and Marcion insisted that God was a strange God, showing himself for the first time, if at all, in Jesus of Nazareth. History was appropriated by Christians. God had never ceased to care and man had never left the hands of God. What happened in Jesus was the once-for-all climax of a story that had no breaks and the correction of all that had gone wrong in that story.

# 5 The Word made flesh

(i) How did God's Word become flesh?
(ii) How is the Word related to God the Father?
(iii) What did the Word achieve by being both man and God?
(iv) How does the Word bring knowledge of God?
(v) How can he be particular and universal, i.e. the man Jesus or the risen Christ *and* the universal Word of God?

That God became man and lived a human life was the chief part of the Christian claim.[1] It was emphatically rejected by the Jews and the philosophers, not to mention Gnostics who could not begin to entertain such an idea. They saw this Christian claim as the rejection of the first Christian proposition, that God is supreme and transcendent. The religions of the day could accept it, but only because they did not hold the Christian idea of God. They might be happy to treat this Jesus as yet another of the many gods they knew, provided he was content to take his place in the line.

## The Gospel to the Gentiles [Acts 17: 16–34]

Paul's speech on the Areopagus presents the climax of the Book of Acts: a sermon preached to Gentiles by the apostle to the Gentiles.[2] It represents the movement of Christianity into the Hellenistic world. An examination of its content provides a valuable confirmation of the problems that have been set out above. Like many sermons, it makes three points: God the creator and lord does not need temples, God has made men to

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[1] John 1: 1–18 shows the central mystery of the Word made flesh.

[2] This brief account is indebted especially to E. Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles, a commentary*, ET (Philadelphia, 1971), pp. 515–31, where the central significance of the speech is stressed, and to M. Dibelius, *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles*, ET (London, 1956), pp. 27–83. Among other valuable literature may be mentioned O. Bauernfeind, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, Theologischer Handkommentar zum NT, 5 (Leipzig, 1939); and H. Conzelmann, 'Die Rede des Paulus auf dem Areopag', *Theologie als Schriftauslegung* (München, 1974), pp. 18–32.

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seek him, and men as the offspring of God should not bow down to idols. The message is pure monotheism and only the conclusion provides a Christian note.

We begin with the unity of mankind and the uniform development of the human race. God has fixed times and bounds for nations, not in the Old Testament sense of these words, but in the wider Stoic sense: the entire life of the human race has been ordered in respect to seasons, habitations and progress in search after God. Athens was dominated by its past, and Paul is troubled by the many idols that he has seen there, which he could not regard as innocent works of art. He speaks (verse 17) in the synagogue on the Sabbath and in the market-place on week-days. The latter activity is reminiscent of Socrates and draws the attention of Epicureans and Stoics who describe him as a *spermologos* and as a messenger of new divinities. (It is hard to fix the place described as the Areopagus.) Paul is called to explain the new or strange things in which he deals; the curiosity of the Athenians (verse 21) was proverbial. Paul stands and speaks like an orator to the men of Athens, indicating his estimate of their culture and learning. He describes them as very religious people because of their abundant religious apparatus, and goes on to speak of the unknown God whom they worship in ignorance and of whom they now hear for the first time. This reference is hard to explain. No altar to an unknown God has ever been discovered, nor is any reference to it to be found in ancient literature. Probably Luke had read in some handbook that there were altars to unknown gods in Athens, and concluded from some words of Pausanias that there was an individual altar that bore the inscription 'To an unknown God'. From this transcendence Paul passes directly to the notion of creation, and quotes Isaiah 42: 5 concerning God's creation and continuing lordship and conservation of the world. Such a creator does not live in the temples men make, nor does he receive the sacrifices they offer. As the Greek enlightenment and the Hellenistic Jewish mission insisted, God has need of nothing. He gives life and breath to all, and orders the seasons and the world.

Verse 27 moves from the transcendent creator to the search for God that goes on in every man. Man tries to find God, and God is near to every man. 'For in him we live and move and are.' Aratus [*Phaenomena* 5], one of 'your' poets, is quoted

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concerning man's affinity to God: 'For we are of His race.' The nearness of God had been stressed by Seneca (*Ep.* 41.1: 'God is near you, with you and within you'; *Ep.* 12.14: 'He is everywhere, and He is here'). Because man is so close to God it is wrong for him to worship idols. The rational being has a natural perception of the gods, according to Dion of Prusa [*Orat.* 12.27], and man is loved by the gods because he is related to them [*Orat.* 30.26]. The same notion that we find in Romans 1 shows that idol worship is directly contrary to truth. God makes man and man makes idols. Idols are below man, while God is above him.

Verse 30 goes on to speak of God's concern with history. God overlooks men's ignorance in past times; but now men must repent, for God has fixed a day of judgement, a day of righteousness, and this day is determined through a man whom God raised from the dead. The final theme of the risen Christ completes the message. Each of the five problems has been indicated in the course of the sermon: the God above, creation, the God within, history and finally the risen man of righteousness. 'All this', comments Dibelius, 'has very little to do with the Paul of the Epistles, but a great deal to do with the exponents of a Christian philosophical system in the second century, namely the Apologists'.[1]

## Method

At this point we grind to an uneasy halt. If these were the problems and concerns of second-century Christian writers, and they are plainly our problems too, why is it not more obvious? We should expect to find in the histories of early Christianity much that will bear on our own questions. Yet, at the end of Daniélou's classic treatment of this period, the English translator speaks of a reaction to the first volume as 'compounded of sheer astonishment at the bizarre character of the ideas and imagery used by the writers and relief that their works had, for the most part, sunk into oblivion'. He adds: 'The present volume also offers plenty of scope for such a response'.[2] Yet Daniélou had done far more for this period than anyone

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[1] Dibelius, *Studies in Acts*, p. 82. The negative claim is not important for present purposes.

[2] J. Daniélou, *Gospel message and Hellenistic culture* (London, 1973), p. 501.