

CHAPTER I

Irenaeus: argument and imagery

1.1 LIFE AND WORK

The original Greek text of Irenaeus' *Against heresies* is found only in fragmentary form, while a complete Latin translation prepared about the year 380 has survived. There are three early manuscripts of the Latin translation, the oldest of which (Claramontanus) dates from the tenth or eleventh century. The others are later (Leydensis, Arundelianus). Erasmus' *editio princeps* of Irenaeus (1526) contains some readings not represented by any of these three manuscripts and the sources from which his variants may derive have since disappeared. Useful editions of *Against heresies* have subsequently been prepared by Massuet, Stieren and Harvey. The recent edition by Rousseau, Doutreleau and others (Sources Chrétiennes) supersedes earlier editions.

Eusebius mentions another work by Irenaeus, *The demonstration of the apostolic preaching*, known since 1907 in a sixth-century Armenian version. Lost works include the *Letter to Florinus* (also known as *Concerning the sole rule of God, or that God is not the author of evil*), *On the Ogdoad*, an attack on the Valentinian Ogdoad, which presents primitive apostolic tradition, *On schism*, addressed to Blastus and *On knowledge*, a refutation of paganism. Irenaeus intended (but did not produce) a work against Marcion (3.12.12). His writings all date from the last two decades of the second century.

Most early theologians were travellers, but their movements and teachers are not always certain. Justin tells us his Palestinian place of birth and philosophical pedigree, and sets his dialogue in Ephesus;¹ his apology and the report of his martyrdom establish that he taught

¹ According to Eusebius, *H.E.* 4.18.8.

and died at Rome. Tertullian illuminates his own native setting in Carthage, but says nothing of time spent elsewhere. Clement of Alexandria tells us where he went to learn (*stromateis* 1.1.11) but does not name his teachers.

We know a little more of Irenaeus' personal life and history. There are limits: despite attempts to prove his non-Hellenic origin, his birthplace remains uncertain. There is wide disagreement on the date of his birth, with estimates from those of Dodwell (AD 98), Grabe (108), Tillémont and Lightfoot (120), Ropes (126), Harvey (130), to those of Dupin, Massuet and Kling (140), Böhringer, Ziegler and others (147). The most probable date lies between 130 and 140.² The early estimates ignore the late development of his writing. The late estimates probably make him too young for episcopacy in 177, when he succeeded the ninety-year-old Pothinus. Irenaeus' claim (5.30.3) that the Apocalypse was written towards the end of the reign of Domitian († 96) and near to the time of his own generation makes a year of birth much after 130 improbable, since a generation was commonly reckoned as thirty or forty years.

There is an uncertain tradition that Irenaeus died as a martyr in 202 or 203 during the persecution of Septimius Severus.³ This claim is first found (410) in Jerome's commentary on Isaiah (ch. 64), but not in his earlier (392) *De viris illustribus*, suggesting that the story may be an interpolation from Gallic traditions concerning the havoc of the persecution in Lyons.

The church at Lyons had begun about the middle of the second century, since those arrested in 177 included its founders. The community was originally Greek and Greek-speaking but included Romans whose Latin names occur among those of the martyrs. Irenaeus indicates a Celtic element in the church and it is clear that, although small, the community represented all social ranks. The churches of Lyons and nearby Vienne were closely related, while connections with Rome and Asia Minor were strong; but the church did not reflect the dominance of the city in the whole of

² A. Benoit, *Saint-Irénée, introduction à l'étude de sa théologie* (Paris, 1960), 50.

³ See J. van der Straeten, 'Saint-Irénée fut-il martyr?', in *Les martyrs de Lyon (177)*, CNRS (Paris, 1978), 145–52. The whole of this book is useful for the understanding of the historical background to Irenaeus.

Gaul.⁴ Lyons was the centre, indeed the ‘recapitulation’ where all Gaul came together: ‘All the threads of Roman public service in this great region converged at Lugdunum and were gathered up at that centre.’⁵

Irenaeus was still young when, at the royal court in Smyrna, he heard and saw Polycarp († 155/6).⁶ The reference to the ‘royal court’ does not establish that the emperor was there at the time, nor is the emperor to be identified certainly with Hadrian, who was resident at Smyrna for the second time between 127 and 129. The period in question could better refer to 136, when the future emperor Antoninus Pius was in Smyrna as Proconsul of Asia. Irenaeus’ report of Polycarp’s words on the decline of the times imply that Polycarp was an older man when Irenaeus heard him, and that he himself was young. A Moscow manuscript of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* states that Irenaeus was teaching in Rome at the time of Polycarp’s death.

Irenaeus names Polycarp as the dominant influence of his youth. As a bishop, Irenaeus was closer to the collegiate pattern of Polycarp than to the monarchical pattern of Ignatius.⁷ We know from Irenaeus (3.3.4) that Polycarp visited Rome two years before his martyrdom to confer with Anicetus on controversy concerning the date of Easter (*H.E.* 5.24.12–17).

Irenaeus elegantly claims to have no rhetoric or excellence of style,⁸ but shows some rhetorical skill and a knowledge of the works of Plato, Homer, Hesiod and Pindar. Although he does not confront the philosophical tradition as do Clement and Origen, his account of God reveals his awareness of the Middle Platonic and Stoic philosophies of the day. He may have gone to Rome to study rhetoric and then gone on to Lyons.⁹ However, Smyrna was a centre of the Second Sophistic movement and his skills could have been learnt at home. His attack on Sophists may be seen as turning

⁴ Benoit, *Introduction*, 52–5.

⁵ James S. Reid, *The municipalities of the Roman empire* (Cambridge, 1913), 179.

⁶ Irenaeus, *Letter to Florinus*, in Eusebius, *H.E.* 4.14.

⁷ J. de Roulet, ‘Saint Irénée évêque’, *RHPPhR* 73.3 (1993), 261–80.

⁸ This does not mean, as Harvey argues, that he was of Syrian origin. See W. Harvey, *Against heresies*, text (Cambridge, 1857), vol. 1, cliv.

⁹ P. Nautin, *Lettres et écrivains chrétiens des IIe et IIIe siècles* (Paris, 1961), 93. See whole section 33–104.

sophistic weapons against their owners, although Benoit considered that he ‘has not totally assimilated rhetoric’.¹⁰ His dominating love of truth came through Justin, from Socrates, Plato and Paul.

Irenaeus travelled (by way of Rome) to the great city of Lyons, situated at the confluence of the Rhône and the Saône in the centre of Celtic Gaul, which at that time stretched from the Seine to the Garonne.¹¹ During the persecution of the church at Lyons in 177, he carried a letter from the confessors in Lyons to Eleutherus, bishop of Rome. It is possible that Irenaeus was already bishop of Vienne and that he took over the care of both churches when Pothinus died. This would explain why Irenaeus was not himself in prison at the time.¹² Irenaeus’ journey, ‘for the peace of the churches’, was on behalf of the confessors at Lyons (*H.E.* 5.3.4). In the same year Pothinus, bishop of Lyons, died in prison, and Irenaeus succeeded to his office. Irenaeus’ participation in current controversies extended into Victor’s tenure as bishop of Rome. His *Against heresies*¹³ was written at Lyons.

We have in a letter an extended account of the persecution at Lyons. The servants of Christ in Vienne and Lyons send to Asian and Phrygian brethren a greeting for ‘peace, grace and glory’ based on a common faith and hope in redemption (*H.E.* 5.1.3). The violent sufferings of the martyrs are contrasted with their moderation and humanity (*H.E.* 5.2.7). The churches of Vienne and Lyons enjoy peace and concord because of the virtues of the martyrs. Vettius Epagathas, for instance, ‘possesses fullness of love to God and neighbour’, is fervent in the spirit and is the comforter of Christians because he has within him the comforter, the spirit. The fullness of his love is seen in his defence of his brothers, for whom he gives his life (*H.E.* 5.1.9–10). The criterion of a true prophet is not asceticism but love of

¹⁰ See Benoit, *Introduction* (58–9), who cites A. Boulanger, *Aelius Aristide et la sophistique dans les provinces d’Asie-Mineure au II^e siècle de notre ère* (Paris, 1923), 441–4. See also F. Sagnard, *La gnose valentinienne et le témoignage de saint Irénée* (Paris, 1947), 69–80 and R. M. Grant, ‘Irenaeus and hellenistic culture’, *HThR* 42 (1949), 41–51.

¹¹ L. Cracco Ruggini, ‘Les structures de la société et de l’économie lyonnaises par rapport à la politique locale et impériale’, in *Les martyrs* (177), 65–97.

¹² Nautin, *Lettres et écrivains*, 94.

¹³ The shorter title given to ‘Unmasking and overthrow of so-called knowledge’.

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God and neighbour.¹⁴ The story of Blandina gives the same pre-eminence to love (*H.E.* 5.1.55–6). Pothinus was fortified by the power of the spirit with a burning desire to be a martyr (*H.E.* 5.1.29). The martyrs had the holy spirit as their counsellor (*H.E.* 5.3.3), and Irenaeus came with their commendation (*H.E.* 5.4).¹⁵

In the brief letter to Eleutherus, the martyrs commend Irenaeus as brother, companion and ‘zealous for the covenant of Christ’ (*H.E.* 5.4.2), a description reminiscent of Elijah, who was very zealous for the Lord God (1 Kings 19:14), and of Mattathias, who was zealous for the law (1 Macc. 2:27).¹⁶ Eusebius’ claim that Irenaeus was a peacemaker in name and nature (*H.E.* 5.24.18) is not simply a play on words but a fact borne out by Irenaeus’ life and work (*H.E.* 5.23–5).

His irenic approach shows that his objection to heresies on matters of faith had little to do with a struggle for power. Peace was strengthened by disagreement on points which were not matters of faith (*H.E.* 5.24). Even on matters of faith, elsewhere he prays for his adversaries whom he loves more than they love themselves (3.25.7). Eusebius considers the Easter controversy to be very serious. The Roman church’s authoritarian intervention in the controversy shocked the churches. Irenaeus stood in the middle of this debate; his theology of redemption, while close to the view of the Quartodecimans as expounded by Melito, was quite compatible with the Roman view of Easter. Irenaeus argued to Victor that both parties in the controversy should be free to celebrate Easter in the tradition of their own church, pointing out that no Roman predecessor had thought it necessary to excommunicate the churches of Asia Minor for their adherence to a primitive practice (*H.E.* 5.24).

Irenaeus explains the difference between the Quartodeciman practice of the Asian churches and other churches, who refused to end their fast on any other day than Sunday, the day of resurrection.

¹⁴ ‘Une telle présentation insistant sur l’amour et le Saint Esprit se pose discrètement en antithèse de Montan et de ses prophétesses’, E. Lanne, ‘Saint Irénée de Lyon, artisan de la paix entre les églises’, *Iren* 69 (1996), 457.

¹⁵ Lanne, ‘Saint Irénée de Lyon’, 458–9.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 460.

If the Quartodeciman practice could not claim ancient and apostolic tradition, Polycrates of Ephesus found a basis for this position in Philip and John, who kept the fourteenth day according to the gospel and the rule of faith (*H.E.* 5.24.6). He agrees that the mystery of resurrection should be celebrated only on the Lord's day, but urges Victor not to reject those churches which hold to an ancient custom. He goes on to talk of different traditions of fasting which had their origin in the past. Our predecessors (he argues), without precision, preserved and transmitted their custom in simplicity; despite their differences, they kept the peace. In striking words, he claims that 'disagreement on fasting validates the agreement on faith';¹⁷ differences of practice had been tolerated because they did not compromise the essential unity of the faith. In the second passage which Eusebius cites, Irenaeus offers examples from history – Roman bishops before Soter had accepted the Quartodeciman practice. They did not observe this practice themselves, but maintained peace with those who did. Irenaeus gives the example of Polycarp and Anicetus. When Polycarp visited Rome, the bishop deferred to him in sacramental communion. Accordingly, peace should prevail rather than uniformity of practice. Matters of faith are different, because, as he points out (1.10.1, 2), there was one faith throughout the world.

In Irenaeus' explanation (4.33) of Paul's words that a truly spiritual disciple judges all and is himself judged by no one (1 Cor. 2:15), a reference to the Montanist controversy has been discerned: he who has received the spirit of God stands in succession to the prophets whose history of salvation he interprets. The truly spiritual disciple confronts the 'pneumatics', the heretics who reject the truth of the church. He also judges false prophets, those who cause schism, who lack the love of God, and who divide the great and glorious body of Christ; these strain at a gnat and swallow a camel (4.33.7). Irenaeus goes on to speak about the supreme gift of love that joins the martyr to the true prophet and to the truly spiritual disciple.

The name of Irenaeus as a peacemaker spread far and wide. A fragment of *Against heresies*, found at Oxyrhynchus, is contemporary

¹⁷ *καὶ ἡ διαφωνία τῆς νηστείας τὴν ὁμόνοιαν τῆς πίστεως συνίστησι.*

with Irenaeus himself. This shows the speed with which his ideas concerning concord between different traditions influenced the whole church.

How close was the link between the churches of Asia and Lyons? Opinions differ. Bowersock denies all relation between the churches of Lyons and Asia. Kraft claims the church at Lyons to be pre-Montanist and closely linked with Asia. Mondésert sums up the controversy as ‘not proven’. Frend claims that the church at Lyons, originally touched by Montanism, came to reject it because of its divisive tendencies.¹⁸

1.2 IRENAEUS PHILOSOPHUS?

The perennial appeal of Irenaeus springs, says Sagnard, from his sincerity and optimism.¹⁹ In 1526 Erasmus wrote with enthusiasm of the freshness and vigour which he found in the work he edited. The writings of Irenaeus seemed fresh with the first force of the gospel and the dedication of one who is ready to die for his faith. Martyrs have a distinctive diction which is earnest, strong and bold. Irenaeus gained these qualities because of his proximity to the days of the apostles and the flowers of martyrdom. He had listened avidly to Polycarp, who had known apostles who had seen and heard the lord and who possessed a vivid and comprehensive memory. From such beginnings the writings of Irenaeus convey the heart of the gospel and the aspiration of martyrdom.

Irenaeus’ strength of mind and strong digestive system (*patientis stomachi*) enabled him, said Erasmus, to handle the tedious monstrosities of the heretics. His opponent Valentinus was a most pompous Platonist who turned his gifts to the confusion of the church and the fabrication of intricate fables. Against the carping of impious philosophers, the philosophy of the gospel is established in strength. While Irenaeus is provoked by the censures of the heretics, his chief concern is positive; the response far exceeds the stimulus. He must use the whole armament of the divine scriptures to confirm the truth which has been attacked. The first Christian

¹⁸ See *Les martyrs* (177), where each of these views is stated.

¹⁹ Sagnard, *La gnose valentinienne*, 78–9.

conflict had been against the Jews. The second was against philosophers and heretics. Philosophy which had caused the trouble, provided the cure. When Valentinus philosophus attacked the church, Justin philosophus and Irenaeus philosophus defended it. Marcion philosophus was answered by Tertullian philosophus and Celsus philosophus by Origen philosophus. Erasmus concludes with the hope that God will raise up peacemakers (Irenaei) to lead the church of his day out of its troubles.

Despite his physical revulsion against the theosophical maunderings of Valentinus, Erasmus still calls him a philosopher. Here he follows the convention of his time and brings out the point that the contest was intellectual and not a struggle for power. Valentinus may have lacked all the qualities which Erasmus looked for in a human mind, but he had to be elevated to the status of philosopher in order to be attacked by argument.²⁰ Today questions of genre ('Is X a philosopher?') are rightly considered less important than the identification of 'the people with poetic gifts, all the original minds who had a talent for redescription'.²¹ Gnostics cited philosophical opinions without argument, and philosophy without argument is like opera without music, ballet without movement and Shakespeare without words. Irenaeus shows less knowledge of philosophy than he does of literature and rhetoric. Philosophers' opinions (cited thirty-two times, chiefly in Book 2), as distinct from the practice of argument, were of little use.²² They are never an indication of philosophy, which may be found rather in Irenaeus' love of argument, subtlety of reasoning, and sense of measure and harmony.²³ Nevertheless, because of popular convention and inevitable misunderstanding, it is unwise to follow Erasmus in speaking of Irenaeus as a philosopher.

²⁰ Today we might distinguish between a philosopher's philosopher and an historian's philosopher. A philosopher's philosopher argues about such subjects as God, freedom, immortality, logic, epistemology, aesthetics, ethics and such subjects as have been linked with them by philosophical convention. Clement of Alexandria, following Aristotle, insisted that philosophy was necessary, because if you argued that it was not you had already begun to philosophize. The historian's philosopher cites the opinions of philosophers, arguing very little if at all.

²¹ R. Rorty, *Contingency, irony and solidarity* (Cambridge, 1989), 76.

²² Benoit, *Introduction*, 73

²³ *Ibid.*, 50 and Sagnard, *La gnose valentinienne*, 70-7.

1.3 THE UNEXPECTED JUNGLE

No one has presented a more unified account of God, the world and history than has Irenaeus. From the moment of his creation, Adam never left the hands of God. The entire universe, visible and invisible, has been brought together in Christ. ‘There is one God the father . . . and one Christ our lord who comes through the whole economy to sum up the universe in himself . . . and as head of the church he draws all things to himself at the proper time’ (3.16.6). ‘There is nothing out of place’ (3.16.7). This unbroken unity embraces opposites, as prophets and psalms declare that the man without beauty, humble and humiliated is holy lord, wonderful counsellor, beautiful, mighty God and coming judge (3.19.2). In contrast to this universal synthesis, the reader of Irenaeus is confronted by stark problems of incoherence, which provoked the conclusion by two great scholars that the thought of Irenaeus is a jungle (*Urwald, forêt vierge*).²⁴ No careful reader of Irenaeus can avoid the sense of confusion.

The nineteenth century produced many valuable expositions of Irenaeus. Duncker found a system in Irenaeus which cohered around his christology. Irenaeus had turned to John for theology, to Paul for anthropology, and his christology joined these two different tendencies. Later writers denied the systematic nature of the doctrine of Irenaeus, although they did not agree on the kind of system they were rejecting. Ziegler would not set out a coherent system which began from a central point and showed breaks within the system presented by Duncker. What we have in Irenaeus, according to Ziegler, is not so much his own system but rather the common doctrine of the ancient church. Irenaeus the bishop wishes to set out the main points of the doctrine of the universal church. Harnack adopted a fragmentary approach to Irenaeus: there was no synthesis, but many separate pieces of tradition which needed to be identified. The ruling principles were that the same God was creator and saviour and that Jesus Christ is saviour as God who has become man.

²⁴ Literally ‘primeval forest’, ‘virgin forest’: Koch and D’Alès respectively. The former describes Irenaeus as a confused compiler ‘doctor constructivus et confusus’.

In the early twentieth century, Bonwetsch produced a lucid and concise account, then Koch claimed a limited coherence on the subject of Adam and evolution but could not credit Irenaeus with anything like general coherence. Beuzart did not see any conceptual scheme in Irenaeus, whose thought he deemed to be governed by polemic and practical needs. Consequently the difficulties and obscurities do not reward investigation. Lawson found nothing systematic in Irenaeus but believed that the many details of his thought had a common effect.

The scene remains confused. The distinguished major contributor, Orbe, has established a school of interpretation which follows his own voluminous work. Orbe takes the whole of Irenaeus seriously, understands him profoundly and explores him endlessly. Yet Orbe's success is almost a deterrent, because he refuses to abbreviate the rich complexity of Irenaeus and the mass of argument and imagery leaves readers overwhelmed.

In English there have been two recent short works, both written as part of a series based on a particular method. Grant set out the historical and cultural background of Irenaeus and selected passages which illuminate the background and the content of Irenaeus. While Minns is aware of complexity, a necessary brevity limits his exposition to Irenaeus' account of what become the main elements of Christian doctrine.²⁵ Fantino and Sesbouïé offer extended treatments and other works may be expected, for there is interest in Irenaeus and appreciation of his worth. Much of the recent energy expended in Irenaeian studies has gone into the preparation of an excellent text and translation, where the work of Rousseau and Doutreleau displays depth of understanding.

1.4 SOURCE CRITICISM AND CONCEPTUAL BANKRUPTCY

Early in the twentieth century, there appeared a remarkable work of source criticism which was to define the mood of scholarship for many years. Loofs analysed the writing of Irenaeus into four or five main sources which were mutually incoherent.²⁶ According to

²⁵ This is justified because Irenaeus claims that all thinking must be done in the context of the rule of faith.

²⁶ Loofs built on earlier work of Harnack and Bousset.