THE CHARACTER OF EARLY CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS
IN THE PSEUDO-JUSTINIAN ORATIO AD GRAECOS

A short, insignificant piece of early Christian literature preserved in the Corpus Apologetarum leads me to make some remarks about the place and the value of the writings of the Apologists.

On the whole these second century authors have not had a good press in theological literature. It is customary to divide the history of the early Church before its stabilisation around AD 180 into three phases, the New Testament period—the Apostolic Fathers—and the Apologists. The usual estimate of this period is that the waters rapidly ran out, not in order to make the deserts blossom, but merely to run into sand. We need only place side by side the figures of Paul, 1 Clement, Justin Martyr or of John, Ignatius and Theophilus of Antioch, to sense the all too rapid beginning and continuing process of spiritual decline and rationalising superficiality. Not until the appearance of Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Clement of Alexandria is there much that is worthwhile: the work and writings of the Apologists are arid and theoretically unimportant.

Not long ago Mönnich argued here in a masterly survey of the subapostolic period, that there is something extraordinary about this group of theologians; while they are rather dull as writers, without significant insights as theologians, and harmless in the battle against paganism, and could therefore hardly be expected to merit much attention, nevertheless it is impossible to bypass them, as they sketched out some lines which became important for the theology of a later period, especially in the Logos doctrine. This description has the air of an indictment. In this approach Mönnich is in line with the great handbooks of Church history and the history of its doctrine. Personally I consider this current verdict to be unjust. I find myself asking whether we are not applying yardsticks to these writers which are inappropriate. Do we place them—forgive the somewhat hackneyed expression—sufficiently 'within the context of their time'? It is in fact hard to escape the conclusion that the whole of this schematisation is badly in need of revision. Already some fifty years ago Gregory was asking when we would at last stop talking about the "Apostolic Fathers", but here as elsewhere the law of inertia holds sway. Nevertheless, it will have to be recognised that terms such as "Apostolic Fathers" and "Apologists", which conjure up the suggestion of particular schools or circles and are then used in a schematic way, are untenable in a proper historical perspective because
they violate chronology and thereby blur our view of the true relationships in the period.\textsuperscript{3}

It is of course impossible to do justice to such issues within the compass of a contribution to a journal. I intend to study just one aspect and in so doing to indicate some lines of approach which, it seems to me, will need to be pursued as a matter of considerable urgency. Such a limited aim is in any case sufficiently important because we are dealing with the Christianity of the second century, in many respects such an obscure period, due to, \textit{inter alia}, the scarcity of sources, yet a time in which the ark of the Church launched out onto the high seas of the civilised world, in which its very existence was at stake as perhaps never thereafter, in which decisions were made which proved to be of far-reaching significance though their origin and structure in this period are only barely discernible.

The work I have in view is hardly ever mentioned in discussions of the place of the Apologists. It is mentioned in the handbooks of early Christian literature not only for the sake of completeness but also because it raises a curious question.

In the edition of the collected works of Justin Martyr produced by von Otto in the middle of last century\textsuperscript{4} we find a short, merely five chapters long \textit{Oratio ad Graecos}. In the manuscript containing apologetic tracts which was lost in a fire in Strassbourg in 1870 it was credited to Justin Martyr, but most scholars today would consider this a mistaken ascription\textsuperscript{5}. The fact itself is not so strange, as very many writings have come to us from antiquity flying a false flag. What is curious, however, is the relationship between this \textit{Oratio} and a text published by Cureton in his \textit{Spicilegium Syriacum}\textsuperscript{6}. Both in structure and content the two pieces combine virtually word for word agreements with striking dissimilarities. The Syriac text, which clearly was translated from the Greek, makes no mention at all of Justin. Here the work is ascribed to a certain Ambrosius, about whom we hear no more than that he was a civic governor. Von Harnack has subjected both versions to a thorough comparative study\textsuperscript{7}. According to him the relationship between them should be understood as follows: the \textit{Oratio} is the original, probably written before AD 240; subsequently, but certainly before Constantine, it was worked over by a certain Ambrosius, of whom we know nothing else, on his own responsibility, and this version is the one which was later translated into Syriac. In any case all the indications are that it was written in Greece, possibly in Corinth. But the more exact information needed to answer “Einleitungsfragen” is lacking.

As things stand, it is virtually impossible for me to bring the problems raised here nearer to a satisfactory solution\textsuperscript{8}. For our present purpose this does not matter. What is important, though, is an inspection of the con-