Leo Meulenberg

The Epistle to Diognetus - An Open Dialogue

This contribution presents the Epistle to Diognetus as an example of a missionary dialogue with the Hellenistic world of the second century. The author of the Epistle enters into dialogue with a society in which the culture among men of letters is one based on the values of the Hellenistic civilization. To remove the first obstacles in the dialogue, the author calls upon the reader’s common sense. At the same time, he tries to find analogies between his faith and the ideas that were popular among the Hellenes in that era, especially there were man is confronted with the mystery of God’s dynamic presence. But the author also introduces a new element: the remarkable way of life of the Christians had to do with their belief in a God who created the world. He can now illustrate the extension of God’s original plan with elements from the Hellenistic way of thinking.

Why is it that the Church in our regions has gradually lost more and more of its importance in recent years? Why is it that – here and elsewhere – its call is no longer understood as an appeal, made to everyone, opening the way for everyone? Why is it that its message is often dismissed with a pitiful smile?

Such questions may, of course, lead to very divergent views. In any case, it is clear that the Church in our days too often lacks trust in the power of the original ideal to further the dialogue with society in an open-minded way. For many, despite everything, it represents one of the numerous systems that, through the ages, have been important for a certain part of mankind. But now, so they say, there is evolving a new, all-encompassing culture that goes its own sovereign way.

Such considerations may play a role when someone begins to consider the question of how the early Church managed to build a bridge to a society that, in all the Mediterranean countries, was coloured by the Hellenistic civilization.

Background

Within the Roman Empire, Christians formed a very small minority. Certainly, they did share a joint heritage with the Jews. But they also constituted a threat to them. Furthermore, they caused great annoyance and vexation among all those dedicated to the worship of the gods. Woe betide those who have the audacity to break with the tradition of the fathers! And even although this cult had long become part of folklore for the higher social strata, they did recognize the importance of having an emperor who sanctioned with his undisputed divine authority a form of government that had stood the test of time.

For the rest, the views of the philosophers cannot be reconciled with the idea of a God who created the world, revealed himself to man in the shape of Jesus Christ, and, in church, shows us the way towards salvation. All this is inconsistent with a
civilization that holds the conviction that our existence is characterized by a deep gap between mind and matter, the eternal and the transient, even though some clear differentiations can be made on this point.

For, in the Hellenistic culture of those days, we see a gradual merging of different schools of thought, in which, on the one hand, the Platonists emphasize that we should return from this earthly life to the one, good, changeless God, and, on the other hand, the Stoics state that we, as the crowning glory of nature, may be able to accept our Fate in this world if we support each other. This leads to a vision, developed against the background of a fundamental conflict, in which the Word, which in Platonic philosophy bridges the gap between the spiritual and physical realities, also takes on the role of the Spirit, which, according to the Stoic view, pervades the universe in all its entirety as a binding force, and ultimately also binds people together. It is this principle that offers us the opportunity to acquire knowledge, whereby we learn to transcend the vicissitudes of life in a sovereign way.

Thus, it becomes obvious that the persecutions of the Christians starting in the first century also met with the approval of the literate. After all, the faithful took a view that did not correspond with a philosophy of life so dear to the large majority of the Romans.

Initially, the early churches therefore exercised restraint. In the words of Ignatius of Antioch we particularly hear the strong appeal of the preacher who knows how to enthuse the churches. On our journey through life it is first of all important that we, in the solidarity with others, meet the resurrected Lord. The approach to society finds expression in the care for fellow human beings, in magnanimity towards non-Christians. And this catches on, particularly among ordinary folk.

But also the more educated citizens begin to ponder. They are impressed by the courage shown. Amongst the literate who are converted to Christianity, there are people looking for an opening, wishing to establish a dialogue with the Hellenistic civilization, in which noble ideals are cherished, particularly by the philosophers.

For example, there is Justin, whose philosophy gave all world events a place within the encompassing reality of God’s creative power, and Clement of Alexandria, who shed a clear light on the unique significance of contemporary civilization.

They belonged to a group of writers who thought that Christianity fulfilled the highest aspirations of man. The author of the Epistle to Diognetus may also be counted as part of that group.

Certainly, there are still other questions to be raised. Which years in the second century does the manuscript date back to? Were the last chapters added later on? Who is the author? In any case, many agree that it is an exposition that familiarizes us with the thoughts of the Apologists in a very unique way. It lacks a fully elaborated vision, but nonetheless the Epistle to Diognetus has a fresh and original quality. In my humble opinion, it brings to the forefront a number of principles that