ON THE HELLENIZATION OF CHRISTIANITY
ONE EXAMPLE: THE SALVATION OF GENTILES IN PAUL

Antonio Piñero

The question of the hellenization of Christianity is very ancient, but it began to be seriously debated since the Protestant Reformation as the new confessions, ideologically and sociologically opposed to Rome, discovered that there were diverse theological levels in the New Testament and that not all the writings contained therein fit into the same ideological, primitive pattern that would fundamentally correspond to Jesus and to Paul. Modern discussion on the “Frühkatholizismus” inside the New Testament raises the same question of the hellenization of Christian theology: a primitive, ideal theology—without ecclesiology, sacraments, hierarchy, dogma, etc., which would be that of Jesus and Paul—that was corrupted by the contact with Hellenism and was transformed into a new hellenized one. This corruption was mainly caused by the followers of the apostle Paul, the authors of Ephesians, Colossians, the Pastoral Epistles, and of 2 Peter. Though the leading liberal, protestant theologian Adolf von Harnack supported that such a Frühkatholizismus did not exist in the New Testament,1 Ernst Käsemann sustained the opposite view,2 which has since then influenced the current Protestant view on the subject: Christian theology was certainly hellenized in the late writings of the New Testament. Käsemann was indeed following the steps of the former History of Religions School, which since the end of the nineteenth century has defended an remarkable influence of Greek popular religion on New Testament authors and on their most important theological conceptions.3

Amongst Catholic NT interpreters, the positions on the issue of the hellenization of Christianity are diverse. Clearly influenced by Protestant theology, most of them sustain that the beginnings of a certain hellenization of Christian theology is apparent in Ephesians, Colossians, and rather less so in Hebrews. In these writings, Hellenistic elements of thinking clearly appear which serve a creative Christian theology. The influence of the mystery religions, especially on Ephesians and Colossians, is admitted with many doubts, and it is generally sustained that it does not seem satisfactory to speak of a massive influence of these religions on the formation of the late New Testament theology. But a partial influence is not excluded, especially in the language and in some literary images. It is still thought that the real hellenization of Christianity begins, in fact, with the Apologists of the second century, with the gnosia, and with the speculative theology of Clement of Alexandria and Origen.

In this brief contribution, we want to defend a return to previous positions—considered already overcome by some NT scholars—of the History of Religions School on the issue of the hellenization of Christianity, because the actual discussion of the problem of New Testament “Frühkatholizismus” does not seem to enter into the core of the matter. I will give only one example, Paul’s doctrine on salvation of Gentiles, to illustrate our case: some brief considerations on the core of this doctrine lead us to a position closer to the "Religionsgeschichtliche Schule."

**1. The core of Paul’s doctrine on the salvation of Gentiles**

In our opinion, Paul’s doctrine on the salvation of Gentiles, as Jesus of Nazareth’s conception of the arrival of the Kingdom, is only well understood if framed in the theology of the “Restoration of Israel.” This seems to be deduced from some Pauline convictions: Paul was persuaded that he was not creating a new religion, but only elevating Israel to perfection, that the end of the world was immediate, and that the complete and real Israel had to confront God’s definitive judgment, according to the view of the Scriptures.

We know that the beginning of the Pauline, personal religious thought was marked by a divine “call” (not a “conversion”!) to take part in the group of believers in Jesus as the messiah. This “call” is described three times (9:1–19; 22:5–16; 26:12–18) in Acts—every time with different connotations and even some contradictions. The call was