LINGUISTIC PROBLEMS IN THE EARLY CHRISTIAN CHURCH

BY

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In the New Testament we are told that for God there exists no distinction of peoples, neither with respect to mankind’s guilt, nor to the promise of salvation. Christ was crucified for Greeks and barbarians alike. So, Hellenistic cosmopolitanism, furthered by Alexander and taught by the Hellenistic philosophers, took on in Christianity a new form and a new background. The Sophist-Stoic doctrine of natural law, the preachings of the Cynics concerning human equality, were rationalistic solutions for a problem which grew steadily more acute. They only superficially influenced the conduct of life in late Antiquity. St. Paul had already distinctly declared that the cosmopolitanism of the new doctrine lay on a completely different religious plane, from the theories of the philosophers: “no more Jew or Gentile, no more slave or freeman, no more male and female, you are all one person in Jesus Christ”. And: “Here is no more Gentile and Jew, no more circumcised and uncircumcised, no one is barbarian or Scythian, no one is slave or freeman; there is nothing but Christ in any of us. You are God’s chosen people, holy and well beloved”.

It is thus not accurate to say, as does Dr. Schneider in his learned but often somewhat superficial work, Geistesgeschichte des antiken Christentums, that the Pauline vision is transversed by the Early Christian idea of τὸ τρίτον γένος, tertium genus. This writer interprets γένος as “people” in a more or less ethnical sense. From this expression, prompted by the Christian “sense of newness” he assumes that, alongside the two great “Weltvölker”, the Jews and the Pagans, the Christians formed a new, young race. This is not true, for the

1 Gal. 3. 28.
2 Col. 3. 11.
3 Carl Schneider, Geistesgeschichte des antiken Christentums I, München (1954) p. 551.
word γένος here is used in a religious, spiritual sense. It rises above all ethnical ideas, and indicates that the Christians are new as ἐκκλησία, as a religious community, as much with respect to the Jewish religious community as to paganism.

This religious cosmopolitanism, which ignores ethnical frontiers but does not seek to abolish them, gives rise, from the beginning, to a linguistic problem. This problem was clearly posited in Acts 2.1, at the first preaching of the Apostles, and on this one, particular occasion was solved in a miraculous manner. This, however, did not dispose of it indefinitely. The linguistic problem facing the first preachers could not have been more impressively conveyed than by that colourful mixture of national names: “There are Parthians among us, and Medes and Elamites. Our homes are in Mesopotamia, or Judaea, or Cappadocia; in Pontus or Asia, Phrygia or Pamphilia, Egypt, or the parts of Lybia around Cyrene; some of us are visitors from Rome, some of us are Jews and others Proselytes; there are Cretans among us too, and Arabians: and each has been hearing them tell of God’s wonders in his own language”.4

The problem of the one message, which had to be brought to so many peoples, arose at that very moment on which the Holy Ghost descended upon the Apostles. Even in Jerusalem itself this problem cropped up, and not only among the cosmopolitan crowd of that first Whitsun Day. It grew more urgent when the Apostles spread out over the oikoumène, and still more so when Christianity penetrated across the frontiers of the cultivated hellenistic world.

This problem however has two aspects. On the one hand there is the external, historical problem of the distribution of the different languages in which Christianity was gradually propagated and in which it found expression. It is this problem which Bardy treats in his excellent book La question des langues dans l'Eglise ancienne.5 And yet this question, although important, is, in my opinion, by no means the most important aspect of the Early Christian linguistic problem. The most important aspect concerns not so much the geographical-historical problem as the internal linguistic one. I

4 Acts 2. 9 sqq.
5 Gustave Bardy, La question des langues dans l'Eglise ancienne I, Paris (1948).