"HELENIZATION" AND LOGOS DOCTRINE IN JUSTIN MARTYR

BY

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The influence of Hellenic culture on early Christianity has engaged scholarship and stimulated debate throughout our century; it has been accused by liberal theologians of having distorted Christianity, and defended by traditionalists as having simply aided the intellectual expression of a pure and unchanging faith. As our century nears its close, it should concern us that this controversy has obscured rather than clarified our picture of what has been called the "hellenization" of Christianity. There are grounds for asking whether the very concept of hellenization is not the cause of the trouble.

Justin Martyr provides an obvious test-case. Have we not heard repeatedly that he initiated the process of restating the Gospel of the Apostles, with its Judaic frame of thought, in terms of the Hellenism that was the intellectual koine of the Mediterranean world? It has not embarrassed commentators that Justin himself, like the other Apologists, viewed his endeavours in a very different light. He did not think in terms of a divide between Judaic and Hellenic modes of thought but stressed the common ground between the two, claiming that both derived, in large part, from the original revelation to Moses. Of course Judaism and Hellenism had developed in different directions, Judaism declining into legalism and superstition, Hellenism into a Babel of competing cults and philosophies; but Christianity in restoring the original revelation, renewed and perfected in the Gospel of Christ, could offer Jew and Greek alike the pure and single teaching that was the origin as well as the goal of their own traditions.

Before we dismiss this picture as an apologetic fiction, at best ingenious and at worst absurd, we should ask ourselves whether our own sharp distinction between Judaism and Hellenism is truly more historical and less ideologically motivated than the quite different picture presented by Justin and the Apologists. We should certainly acknowledge that by the time Justin came on the scene a hellenizing pro-
cess had so long been proceeding within Judaism itself that Judaism no longer presented a sharply contrasting culture. Justin had no need to translate the biblical message out of Judaic categories in order to make it intelligible to Greeks; such Jewish writers as Aristobulus, Philo and Josephus had performed the task already, and Justin was perfectly honest in seeing no sharp opposition between Judaism as it had reached him and Hellenism. But the interpenetration of the two cultures was much older than this. The Greeks knew that their own cult and philosophy were deeply indebted to ancient New Eastern cultures, especially those of Egypt and Babylon; modern study of the ancient civilizations of the Near East has revealed that they exerted an equal influence on Old Testament Judaism. Our picture of biblical religion as something that stood over against Near Eastern and Greek paganism, as a tradition originally independent that had then to enter into complex and dangerous relations with alien surrounding cultures, needs to be replaced by an acknowledgement of the breadth and depth of the common stock of religious customs and ideas that united all these civilizations of the Mediterranean and the Fertile Crescent.

This is not to deny that Judaism and Hellenism each possessed certain unique features, but it remains a distortion to treat them as two opposed systems, each one coherent and consistent in itself and sharply contrasting to the other. Christian thinkers have found this picture attractive for a variety of reasons: there have been some interesting attempts to treat Christianity as an Hegelian synthesis of which Hellenism and Judaism are thesis and antithesis; and it has always been tempting to view Hellenism and Judaism as embodying reason and revelation respectively. But the historian is likely to conclude that this contrasting and opposing of the one to the other is ideologically motivated rather than objectively sound, and that he must himself discard it.  

To return to Justin, we should cease to inquire how he and the Apologists “hellenized” Christianity. The question that needs to be posed is a more narrowly defined one: to what extent did he employ the particular doctrines of the Greek philosophical schools, notably Platonism? As we have argued, Hellenism was not so novel and alien to the Christian inheritance that the influence of Greek philosophy threatened to transform the faith; but the question of the extent of this influence on Justin’s theology remains a valid one. In this context our modern handbooks often assure us that Justin and the Apologists took