

**NORTHERN CARIBBEAN UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF RELIGION AND THEOLOGY**

SUMMARY OF THE ORIGIN
AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE
CHURCH IN SOCIETY:
GREEK PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND

An Assignment Presented
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**THST 660:
CHURCH AND SOCIETY**

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Introduction

Confrontation in the Near East where Christianity originated was abated by the iron might of the Roman Empire at its zenith in the 1st and 2nd centuries (96 to 180 CE). The religion came to prominence at a time when the Roman peace (*Pax Romana*) of Caesar Augustus brought a network of roads to the empire and formal religious toleration allowed religions to flourish. Christianity rode this crest of opportunity and its adherents multiplied exponentially. The atmosphere was rich with religious diversity including Judaism, Roman state religion, the mystery cults and the schools of Greek philosophy. It must be noted here that Greek philosophy provided the ideas that steered the minds of Roman citizens of the Empire and shaped their religion. Philip Curtin emphasizes that the growth of the Roman Empire provided an articulating framework for the cultural synthesis that Greek Philosophy generated.¹

This brief, reflective research looks analytically at the impact of Greek philosophy on Christianity from three perspectives. They are: 1) the challenge that it presented to Christianity, 2) the signs of syncretism, and 3) Christian differentiation despite assimilation of aspects of Greek philosophy. Though not exhaustive because of its brevity, the study may help with discussions on the backgrounds of Christianity, and also stimulate an interest in the religion, politics, and history of the Levant in the first century.

The Challenge to Christianity

Everett Ferguson recounts that the Christian church grew in the matrix of a Greek philosophical background that was built on the pillars of Hellenism. Hellenism is a way of life characterized by Greek culture, philosophy, and religion that was popularized by Alexander, the

¹ Philip Curtin, *African History*, 2d ed. (New York, NY: Longman, 1995), 51.

Great Greek conqueror. There was a multifarious interaction between the prevalent Hellenic philosophy of the age and Christianity. Jesus of Nazareth lived in Palestine, an Aramaic culture with traditional Jewish philosophies and modes of thought. However, Palestine was over-run by the Romans and had been Hellenized for many years before Romans occupied the territory.”²

In 1st century Palestine, Hellenism influenced the worldview of the intelligentsia and the common man. The conflict between Hellenism and Christianity is attested to by the New Testament in Paul’s encounters with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers (Acts 17:18), his discourse against worldly wisdom (I Cor 1:18-31), and his warning against philosophy in Col 2:8. As Christianity spread throughout the Hellenic world, an increasing number of church leaders were educated in Greek Philosophy. In addition to Hellenism, there were other religions that challenged Christianity and were participants in polemic controversies and confrontations which impacted Christians and the society at large.

Stoicism and Epicureanism were the two principal philosophical schools in the Hellenistic age. The founder of Stoicism was Zeno of Citium, Cyprus (335-263 BC). Some tenets of Stoicism were: humanity must be protected from fear; the goal of life is virtue; nothing is immaterial; everything is tripartite – the word, the idea, and the physical; divinity is in everything; belief in Pantheism; and the use of allegories.³

Signs of Syncretism

No serious historian or theologian can afford to disregard the broken shards, stripped paint and dents in Christianity resulting from its collision with Greek Philosophy in the first

² Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 3d ed., (Grand Rapids, MI.: W.B Eerdmans, 2003), 12-15.

³ *Ibid*, 354-379.

century. The collision birthed a religious syncretism of beliefs that paved the way for Christianity's acceptance but also brought confusion that resulted in schisms in Christianity. Religious syncretism is the combining of different beliefs to create an underlying unity and allowing for an inclusive approach to other faiths.

The Church historian Eusebius suggested that Greek philosophy had been supplied providentially as a preparation for the Gospel. Augustine of Hippo, who ultimately systematized Christian philosophy, wrote in the 4th and early 5th century: "But when I read those books of the Platonists I was taught by them to seek incorporeal truth, so I saw your 'invisible things, understood by the things that are made'"⁴

Even before the advent of Christianity the stage was set by the LXX (Greek Old Testament). The LXX was a product of Hellenized Alexandrian Jewish scholars authorized by Ptolemy II Philadelphus (Ptolemaic king of Egypt) between the 3rd and the 2nd century BCE. Justo Gonzalez writes that these Jews were obliged to show that Judaism was not as barbaric as one might think, but was closely linked to genuine Greek thought. Gonzales mentions the work of Alexander Polyhistor, a 1st century BCE author and gives examples as follows:⁵

Demetrius (2nd century B.C) relates the history of the kings of Judah, making use of Alexandrian scholarship; Eupolemus (2nd century B.C.) makes Moses the inventor of the alphabet, which the Phoenicians took from the Jews and later introduced into Greece; Artaphanus (third century B.C.) even affirms that Abraham taught the principles of astrology to Pharaoh, and that Moses established the Egyptian cults of Apis and Isis. About the middle of the 2nd century B.C., one Aristobolus wrote an *Exegesis of the Law of Moses*, whose purpose was to show that whatever there was of value in Greek Philosophy had been taken from the Jewish Scriptures...All these are no more than a few

⁴ Augustine, *Confessions* 7. 20

⁵ Justo L. Gonzales, *A History of Christian Thought, Vol 1: From the Beginnings to the Council of Chalcedon* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press; 2nd Revised edition, 1987), 43-44.

examples that have come down to us of what must have been the state of mind of the Jews of the Diaspora during the Hellenistic period.⁶

Philo of Alexandria was a contemporary of Jesus, who interpreted the Jewish Scriptures using the principles of Greek Philosophy. Philo was very deliberate to note that the Scriptures use allegories to teach the same things that Plato, Aristotle and the others taught. Philo emphasized that these philosophers lived after Moses and that they distilled their highest thoughts and accomplished their greatest works from their understanding of Scripture.⁷

Christian assimilation of Hellenic philosophy was anticipated by Philo and other Greek-speaking Alexandrian Jews. Philo's blend of Judaism, Platonism, and Stoicism strongly influenced Christian Alexandrian writers like Origen and Clement of Alexandria, as well as, in the Latin world, Ambrose of Milan.

Ferguson adds the understanding that the synthesis of Platonic and Aristotelian theology with Christianity birthed the model of God characterized by strict omnipotence, omniscience, and benevolence. He notes that the Aristotelian view of God grew from Platonic roots, arguing that God was the "Unmoved Mover." Hellenic Christians transposed this philosophy to the Christian God. Philosophers took all the things that they considered good, such as power, love, knowledge, size, and declared that God was "infinite" in all these respects. The Christian God was thus omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, benevolent, and immutable.⁸

⁶ Moses Hadas, *Hellenistic Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), 83-104.

⁷ Philo, *The Works of Philo* (Peabody, MA: Hendrikson Publishers, 1993), 25-50; 459-491.

⁸ Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 3d ed., (Grand Rapids, MI.: W.B Eerdmans, 2003), 387-388.

Most of the early church fathers were Greek-speaking Gentiles who were trained in classical philosophy. This meant that Greek philosophy became a significant influence on Christian thought. Like the Hellenistic Jews before them, they believed classical philosophy to be compatible with the ancient teachings of Semitic monotheism, and even more with the teachings of Christianity.

In the book *Rebuilding the Matrix*, Dennis Alexander instructs that Geocentrism supported the view that the Earth was the center of the universe, and the sun, moon, and stars revolved around the Earth; this view was devised by Ptolemy, a Greek philosopher. With the synthesis of Greek and Hebrew ideas and the rise of the Catholic Church, the geocentric model was incorporated into Church theology along with other Greek scientific thought. It was not until the 16th and 17th century that Copernicus, Galileo and Johannes Kepler with his three laws of planetary motion challenged geocentrism with heliocentrism.⁹

Anselm of Canterbury composed the “Ontological Argument” for the existence of God which he believed to be irrefutable. In essence, he argued that because God is by definition the being than which no greater can be conceived, and it is more perfect to exist than not to exist, that conceiving God not to exist was not conceiving God at all – it was conceiving a being less than perfect, which would not be God. Therefore, the argument proceeded, God could not be conceived not to exist. Anselm defined God as the “Being than which no greater can be conceived.”¹⁰ According to Paul Enns, the “Ontological Argument” is a defining example of Christian theology that stemmed from Platonic thought. If a concept could be formed in the

⁹ Denis Alexander, *Rebuilding the Matrix* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan, 2001), 109-124.

¹⁰ Anselm, *Summa Theologiae*, article 3,

human mind (as was his concept of God), then it had a real existence in the abstract realm of the universals, apart from his imagination. In essence, if he could imagine God, then it meant that God existed.¹¹

Philosophy in the Hellenistic world was not the critical metaphysical discipline it is today; it was a way of life. The Greek philosopher, Socrates used similar teaching methods to Christ as in his use of questions for self-examination and allegories. Medieval Scholasticism became prominent in large part because of the translation during the 12th century of the works of Aristotle. Scholastics followed the deductive logic of Aristotle in their approach to understanding biblical truth. One form of Scholasticism was Realism which followed Plato; Realism taught that universal ideas exist apart from individual objects. Anselm and Bonaventura were prominent realists. Thomas Aquinas, the greatest of the scholastics held the view of moderate realists who followed Aristotle.¹²

Christian Differentiation despite Integration of Philosophies

In the second and third centuries CE, Christians struggled with opposition from detractors and doctrinal debates among themselves. The Church Fathers wrote apologetics and polemics. Doctrines were established, the canon of the New Testament was formed, and Apostolic Succession guarded against wrong interpretations of Christian teachings.

Thus, even though the collision between Christianity and Greek philosophy was deleterious in some aspects, the resultant reestablishment of its primary principles guided by the Church Fathers gave Christianity a portability and robustness that would ensure its growth

¹¹ Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1989), 184-185

¹² Ibid.

in the centuries to come. As well, the tenets of Christianity defined in its doctrines made the religion clearly identifiable among the dominant philosophical traditions of the Greco-Roman world at the time. Epicureanism, Stoicism and particularly Platonism were readily incorporated into Christian ethics and theology but did not change essentially the doctrines articulated by the New Testament writers.

One early Christian writer of the 2nd and early 3rd century, Clement of Alexandria, demonstrated Greek thought in writing: "Philosophy has been given to the Greeks as their own kind of Covenant, their foundation for the philosophy of Christ ... the philosophy of the Greeks ... contains the basic elements of that genuine and perfect knowledge which is higher than human ... even upon those spiritual objects."¹³ In declaring this Clement was very careful to establish the superiority of Christ as he made the distinction in saying that Greek Philosophy was a "schoolmaster to bring 'the Hellenic mind,' as the law, the Hebrews, 'to Christ.'"¹⁴ Philosophy therefore paved the way for him who is perfected in Christ.

Paul was familiar with philosophical, especially Stoic idioms and assumptions and used these to express his own arguments¹⁵ Albeit, Paul declared in Philippians 3:8 that: "Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ."

Philo defended Judaism against the charge of Greek Philosophy that it was primitive and backward. He wrote a multi-volume commentary on the Old Testament, in which he attempted

¹³ Clement, *Miscellanies* 6. 8.

¹⁴ Clement Stromateis 1.5.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 368

to show that, in fact, all of the wisdom and insight of Greek philosophy actually originated in the writings of Moses. In differentiating Greek Philosophy and Christianity, Gonzalez makes reference to Philo and his view of Plato as quoted:

“The God of Philo is a combination of Plato’s idea of the beautiful and the God of the patriarchs and prophets. God is absolutely transcendent, so that no direct relationship exists between God and the world. Moreover, as Creator, God is beyond the ideas of the Good and Beautiful.¹⁶ As to the character of the *logos*, it should be pointed out that it is different from the *logos* of the Fourth Gospel. The *logos* of Philo is a being apart from and inferior to God, and is found in a frame of reference that affirms the absolute transcendence of God and that therefore denies a direct relationship between the divine and the world. All this is far from the thought of the Fourth Gospel.¹⁷

Although it is widely recognized that the Christian Church emerged partly from this Hellenistic matrix, it is in itself a unique expression of God. Barth explains that: The relativising of the Christian religion (or any comparative analysis) does not mean that Christian faith is made weak or uncertain or hesitant, or that the decision for the truth of the Christian religion is robbed of its firmness and confidence.¹⁸

That there is a true religion is an event in the act of the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

Barth undergirds this as he recollects that:

The name of Jesus Christ is not to be regarded in any sense, open or secret, as a name for man. Neither is it to be regarded as a name for the men who stand in a definite historical connection with Jesus Christ. There are anointed prophets, priests and kings in the Old Testament, Christians in the New Testament, but only depending upon and proceeding from the fact that there is a unique Christ, the Lord of the covenant attested in the Old and New Testaments. Before Him and after Him there is no one to be

¹⁶ Harry A. Wolfson, *Philo: Foundation of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948), 1: 200-204.

¹⁷ Gonzalez, 45-46.

¹⁸ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1, part 2, eds. G.W Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, trans. G.T. Thompson and Harold Knight (New York: T & T Clarke International, 2004), 331.

compared to Him. He is utterly different from all others, the proper Christ, of whom they are but types.¹⁹

Summary

In summation, Christianity emerged in a world immersed in Greek Philosophy and Hellenistic hegemony that framed its development. Unavoidably, Christianity was expressed using many ideas that existed within that framework of thought but maintained its uniqueness because it was different. The buoyancy of the religion is attributable to its cosmopolitan appeal that overarched Greek philosophy with its claim that Jesus, the *logos*, was the divine Son of God and His manifestation through incarnation was God's greatest revelation and gift to man.

The confrontation between them both with its resultant challenges, mergers, and differentiation of ideology determinedly shaped the doctrine and mission of the Christian Church for the upcoming centuries.

¹⁹ Ibid, 12