

INTRODUCTION

Philosophers bring about great change in the thinking of their world; but they themselves are the product of the times and the thinking of their predecessors. The influence of philosophy on religion in the West (as well as the East) has been very great.

Since the concern of this book is centred in the Christian faith, it will be interesting to explore all that is possible about the influence of philosophy on Christian thought within the limited pages allowed to it.

Contemporary Christian thought seems to flounder in its current inadequacy to grasp the reality of its times. Now as perhaps never before, the times seem to be swollen with the influence of the products of scientific technology and instant communication. The present world staggers under its enormous load of uninterpreted, misinterpreted, and often misused knowledge. Ethical problems inundate people like a flooded stream which sweeps away and destroys everything that happens to be there when high waters arrive. Men have not progressed far enough morally to be able to meet this new knowledge and new power with adequate wisdom and judgement.

Someone has suggested that if the Christian doctrine of Creation is viable, it may be that a "theology of science" or a "theology of history" is needed more than a philosophy of religion. Certainly a Christian analysis of current history similar to Karl Marx's "secular, religious treatment of history and economics" could point the way toward a better understanding and reaction to our times. The contemporary educational system carries a student from kindergarten through the university without one course on the serious study of God's role in the life of the universe. Such a system is the practice of atheism in its most dynamic and effective form—all done in the name of "freedom of religion." Since the "scientific method" is the basis of all the theories of education, and since it has been affirmed that religion cannot ever verify scientifically the existence of God,¹ a claim for the "freedom of religion" is responsible for a "freedom from religion."

Paul Tillich has tried to meet the challenge by basing his arguments on the ontological method.² Anselm (A.D. 1033-1109) tries to establish the existence of God by using idealistic arguments. These arguments may have been convincing for his contemporaries, but may be taken for nonsense statements in modern thought.³

¹Immanuel Kant. Cf. Carl J. Friedrich, ed., *The Philosophy of Kant* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1949), pp. 104-106.

²Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 10.

³G. E. Moore and others.

Immanuel Kant has shown that it is impossible to establish through scientific verification that God exists; but by the same reasoning it cannot be proven that God does not exist.⁴

Colin Brown says, "God is known in experience through personal encounter. The aim of philosophy is to understand the nature of this experience in depth."⁵

The Bible never seeks to prove the existence of God. The first words of the Bible are: "In the beginning God . . ." Psalm 14:1 says: "The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God." The Bible *presupposes* the existence of God, and the Christian accepts by faith that God exists.

If such is the case, why study the philosophy of religion? Elton Trueblood answers:

Philosophy is always needed, and needed especially in religion, because philosophy is the only human enterprise in which careful scrutiny not only of intellectual processes, but also of presuppositions, is the main business for which there is professional training. For this there is no substitute. . . Unexamined faith is not worth having.⁶

⁴Immanuel Kant. Cf. Carl J. Friedrich, ed., *The Philosophy of Kant*, pp. 104-106.

⁵Colin Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* (London: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 23.

⁶David Elton Trueblood, *Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1957.), pp. 13, 14.

LESSON 1

THE CHRISTIAN TRANSITION FROM THE JEW TO THE GENTILE

The New Testament history recorded in the Book of Acts is the best source for explaining the origin of the influence of philosophy on Christian thought. To be sure, the Greek Septuagint (LXX) was translated and published more than two hundred years before Christ and was in extensive use by such people as Paul and perhaps even Jesus. Philo, the Jewish Platonist, lived a little before and contemporary with Jesus. The Greek language was the universal language of the Roman World. Alexander the Great had seen to that. Shortly after the oral version of the gospel was written down it was translated into Greek. There is solid evidence that the Acts, the Epistles and the rest of the New Testament were written originally in Greek. In writing the Book of Acts¹

The chief purpose was the portrayal of Christianity asserting its universalism over against the effort to limit it to the narrow concepts of first-century Judaism . . . Luke demonstrated the outworking of that intention of Jesus, presenting its glorious triumph in the inclusion of the Gentile and its sad tragedy in the self-exclusion of the Jew.

With this radical transition came a new interpretation of the Scriptures. The Gentile mind was very familiar with and sympathetic to Greek philosophy and logic, while Jewish rabbinical methods seemed very strange and even false and illogical. The Jewish allegories and the rabbinical emphasis on legalism were all a part of a culture which excluded Gentiles.

Greek philosophy, some good and some bad, was scattered everywhere. Strangely enough, God used both the good and the bad to prepare for the coming of Christ. The atheistic and skeptical philosophy of the Greeks turned many in the Gentile world away from the superstitious worship of false gods and intensified their heart-hunger for the true God. The good Greek philosophy . . . prepared the world . . . by magnifying the worth of the human spirit and by placing high value upon spiritual and moral truth.²

¹Frank Stagg, *The Book of Acts* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1955), pp. 17, 18.

²Robert A. Baker, *A Summary of Christian History* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1959), p. 3.

UNDERLINE the best answer.

The Greek Septuagint (LXX) was used little, extensively by Christians in the first century.

(extensively)

The universal language of the Roman world was

(Greek)

Evidence indicates that the Book of Acts and the Epistles were written originally in

(Greek)

DRAW A CIRCLE around the best answer.

According to Frank Stagg, the purpose of the Book of Acts was

to assert Judaism's control over the new Christian movement

to assert its universalism over efforts to confine Christianity within narrow Judaism.

(Compare your answer with the text.)

This radical transition also brought about a new

_____ of the _____.

(interpretation, Scriptures)

Name two ways Robert A. Baker gives that Greek philosophy contributed to the world's preparation for Christianity.

(Compare your answers with the text.)

The Greek thought was more universal, and "philosophy was to the ancient Greeks what the Old Testament was to the Jews."³

This transition from rabbinical to Greek interpretation became evident even before the New Testament was written. There was, indeed, a strict adherence to the historical elements of the gospel and the authority of the Old Testament, but the theological interpretation of the Gospel event became more and more affected by those who were to hear it. In Acts 17, the story of Paul at Athens is a rehearsal of the transition described above in its most extreme application. Later, when the "preGnostics" were at conquest in Colosse, we read Paul's protest: "Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy . . . and *not after Christ*" (Col. 2:8, italics mine).

Ancient Christian centres of the first and second centuries were located in Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, Ephesus and Rome. Each one struggled to capture and guide the mind of Christendom, and each centre had some characteristics and opinions that were unique. The influence of Plato, Plotinus, and Stoicism may be seen easily in the thought that flowed from these ancient cities. Aristotle would have to wait until the thirteenth century before he would make his mark on Christian thought, except in his rigid control on the logic used in all the intervening time.

Thorleif Boman says:

The question of the formal and real relationship between Israelite-Jewish and Greek-Hellenistic thinking became for Christianity and the Church a live problem, and the occasion of penetrating theological investigations, only after Adolph Harnack had called attention to its great importance for the development of dogma in the early Christian Church, a Church endowed with Greek thinking and mental life, and after he had maintained that the Gospel was hellenized, and that dogma was a product of the Greek intellect in the soil of the Gospel.⁴

Just how true Boman's observation may be should be of great concern to every believer in the Christian faith. It certainly seems that Israelite-Jewish thinking was not prepared then, as it is not now, to accept the revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ, the Messiah, which the Christian world stoutly affirms. On the other hand, when the interpreter of Christian thought introduces anything other than the teachings of the Old Testament and the teachings of the Apostles, found in the New Testament, he weakens the message of the gospel and opens the opportuni-

³Colin Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* (London: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 7.

⁴Thorleif Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), pp. 17, 18.

The transition from _____ to _____ interpretation was evident before the New Testament was _____.

(rabbinical, Greek, written)

Answer true or false.

According to the author Acts 17 is a rehearsal of the transition from rabbinical to Greek interpretation.

(true)

Name five centres of the early Christian movement that sought to capture and guide the mind of Christendom.

(Compare your answers with the text.)

According to Thorleif Boman, dogma was a product of the Greek _____ in the _____ of the gospel.

(intellect, soil)

ty for the refutation of his message. The Church inherited its Scriptures from the past.

From them it learnt (sic) and taught doctrines of God, creation and salvation. But it also inherited a good deal of Greek philosophy . . . Greek arguments and concepts were used to defend Christian ideas . . . It is difficult to tell which was the more disastrous consequence: the distortion of the Christian teaching by foisting upon it non-Christian ideas, or the fact that, when such ideas were attacked by later critics, the critics believed that they had disposed of Christianity itself.⁵

After the last Apostle was dead, and the New Testament was not yet canonized, the Christian world struggled to understand itself, its origin and its mission without many authoritative voices to guide it. The second century became the time of some who had known the Apostles personally but not Jesus Himself. "It was a period when the new Christian movement was competing with the older doctrines (Greek philosophy, the mystery religions, and the Jewish Tradition)."⁶

⁵Colin Brown, pp. 19, 20.

⁶Albert E. Avey, *Handbook in the History of Philosophy*, 2nd. ed. (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1961), p. 53.

Answer true or false.

According to Colin Brown early Christians combined Roman ideas with Jewish rabbinism to defend Christian ideas. _____

(false)

The second century became a time of those who had known the _____ but not _____.

(Apostles, Jesus)

Home Study Exercise

Basic activity (*Levels 1, 2, and 3*). Read the study guide and answer the following questions:

1. How extensive was the use of the Greek Septuagint (LXX) in the first Christian century?

2. Why were the Scriptures written in Greek?

3. According to Frank Stagg, what was the chief purpose in writing the Book of Acts?

4. According to Robert A. Baker, how did Greek philosophy prepare the world for Christianity?

5. What transition began in Scripture interpretation in the early days of Christianity?

6. List five important Christian centres during the first and second centuries.

7. What effect did these early Christian centres have on the mind of Christianity?

8. What conclusion does Thorleif Boman make regarding Christian dogma?

9. According to Colin Brown, what did early Christians use to defend Christian ideas?

10. What was different about the second Christian century?

Supplementary activity (*Levels 2 and 3*). Read pages 15-17 in Colin Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* and answer the following questions:

1. According to Colin Brown, Plato's "realism" taught that physical perception by means of sight, sound, touch, taste and smell—even common sense—was not real. What, then, was real for Plato?
2. How did Clement of Alexandria and Origen view this kind of reality?
3. What was Aristotle's contribution to Christian thought besides his "Unmoved Mover"?

Advanced activity (*Level 3*).

1. Write an essay of no more than two pages on "The Greek Language and Its Effect on the Spread and Interpretation of Christian Thought."
2. What were the predominant languages in the five great centres of Christianity?
 - Rome
 - Jerusalem
 - Alexandria
 - Ephesus
 - Antioch
3. What language was common to all these centres? Why was this significant?

Seminar Discussion

1. What part did racial discrimination play in the Greek growth of the early Church?
2. How much did philosophy change the influence of Old Testament revelation upon the Christian Gospel?
3. Was Plato's realism the basis for doctrines such as the "real Presence in the Mass," "baptismal regeneration," or the rise of the power of the Bishop?
4. Is Aristotle's God the God of the Bible? Discuss why.