

Epicureanism as the spiritual essence or 'religion' of an entire community

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I am glad I am getting the engagement I hoped I would be getting when I registered here. To avoid any misunderstandings, I wish to make clear that I don't regard anybody on this awesome page (thank goodness it exists) as somehow less Epicurean than I am whatever his views on any of the issues raised here may be. I see us all as being equally dedicated to Epicureanism and these discussions simply serve to provide some intellectual stimulation in the interests of pleasure and it's in no wise my intention to irritate someone or sow divisions.

Now, in the limited time I have before bed I would like to briefly address the issue of Christian epistolography. The most famous examples thereof are of course the letters attributed to Paul as integral part of the biblical canon, although not all of them are considered authentic today. The texts present the very first examples of Christian literature.

Claiming that the letters of the Corpus Paulinum belong to the literary genre of philosophical letters, (a tradition with no antecedents in Jewish culture during Paul's time) does not somehow contradict their status as 'real letters'. Allow me to translate the following paragraph from the German wiki article on the Pauline letters which illustrates the point well.

Die Paulusbriefe sind viel länger als gewöhnliche antike Privatbriefe, haben eine überlegte Gliederung und waren zum öffentlichen Verlesen im urchristlichen Gottesdienst bestimmt. Sie enthalten eine Vielfalt literarischer Kunstformen, die der Autor gezielt als Mittel der theologischen Argumentation einsetzte und die seine rhetorische Bildung zeigen. Ihr Zweck, eine persönliche Beziehung zwischen Autor und Adressaten zu bewahren und zu vertiefen, verbindet sie mit gewöhnlichen Freundschafts- und Familienbriefen. Ihre Kombination von lehrhaften, ethischen und autobiografischen Inhalten verbindet sie mit zeitgenössischen philosophischen Briefen. Darum werden die Paulusbriefe formal und inhaltlich als spezifisch urchristliche Literaturform eingestuft.

The Pauline letters are much longer than common private letters from antiquity. They are composed in neat sections and were meant to be read openly during the proto-Christian mass. They contain a plethora of literary conventional standards employed deliberately by the author as a means to argue theological points thus revealing his training in ancient rhetoric. The letters' goal to maintain and increase the personal connection between author and recipient puts them in the same category as typical correspondence between friends and family. However, their combination of didactic, ethical and autobiographical content puts the letters in the same group with contemporary philosophical letters. Hence, the letters are classed as regards their formal character and their particular content as a specifically proto-Christian

literary genre.

Notice the distinction between Form (format, or formal character) and Inhalt (particular content) in the German paragraph. The formal character here is twofold: 1) that of a Greco-Roman philosophical letter with its typical literary and rhetorical conventions 2) that of a letter between close friends. The particular content is Proto-Christian theology. This distinction between format and content is ubiquitous in all continental European scholarship that has to do with the humanities. So there is no contradiction here from the European point of view. Something can be an ancient philosophical letter, Christian theology and a perfectly 'real letter' at the same time and face no existential crisis.

There is however a cultural tendency to ignore the use of such theoretical tools in the English-speaking countries or even to mock them as unscientific. Caspar Hirschi laments this fact in the English version of his book on nationalism and tries to convince his readers why they are actually useful. This tendency explains why some real historical affinities are automatically felt to be impossible contradictions or arbitrary verbose nonsense (for example the connection between humanism and nationalism that Hirschi writes about).

The tendency also explains some cultural habits that European observers find odd and leave them shaking their heads. For example, English-speaking atheists might talk about the differences between atheism and deism and then say that reasonable people are rather deists since they avoid 'strong claims' or they might talk about the differences between strong atheism and weak atheism etc. The problem with all this is that very little effort is made to contextualize and historicize the discussions surrounding those terms and concepts so in the end the whole thing resembles teenagers analyzing a videogame and arguing over which one is better.

In other words, they act as if the world of ideas is a supermarket where uniquely labeled products are neatly arranged on the shelf for you to buy, use and discard. But the world of ideas rather resembles a complex ecosystem: a highly dynamic and messy ecological environment where individual components are never seen sitting on a shelf. They constantly interact with other components over the course of their life cycle and are then consumed by other components and subsequently recycled into new different ones.