

Avowed Enemies of Epicurus: The Christian Apologists Generally

Post by “Cassius” of February 12, 2020 at 10:20 AM

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[Epicureanism and the Christian Apologists](#)

By the mid-2nd century A.D., the Christian movement had become secure enough so that it could aspire to win converts from more educated circles. Certain church leaders began to seriously engage themselves intellectually against Greek philosophy, often in the form of written apologias against “pagans” and rival Christians. These works routinely included attacks on Epicureanism, as shown by **Tatian's** *Address to the Greeks*, **Justin the Martyr's** *Hortatory Address to the Greeks* and *On the Resurrection*, and **Irenaeus of Lyon's** *Against the Heretics*.

Two significant anti-Epicurean themes emerged in these early apologias: first, Justin and Tatian mocked Greek philosophers as being hopelessly disputatious with one another, taking their disagreements as evidence that human intellect could not arrive at definite conclusions about reality (a somewhat ironic charge in view of the emerging factionalism of the Christians themselves). In the *Hortatory Address to the Greeks*, Justin writes:

“How then, you men of Greece, can it be safe for those who desire to be saved, to fancy that they can learn the true religion from these philosophers, who were neither able so to convince themselves as to prevent sectarian wrangling with one another, and not to appear definitely opposed to one another's opinions?”

The second theme was to attack the specifically Epicurean denial of divine providence and after-life and affirmation of pleasure as the supreme good and of materialistic atomism. While these earliest apologias often lumped Epicurus together with other philosophers, the succeeding decades saw a significant change. The next major Christian antagonist of Epicureanism was **Tertullian** (2nd to 3rd century A.D.). Unlike previous Christian apologists, Tertullian fully grasped the gross irrationality of his own anti-Epicurean arguments, and was all the more inflamed against it by the inclination of certain heretics to adopt Epicurean doctrines in arguing against bodily resurrection or against divine providence. Tertullian's rage against Epicureanism and other Greek philosophies and their influence on heretics is best illustrated in *The Prescription Against Heretics* where he says “These are the doctrines of men and of demons produced for itching ears of the spirit of this world's wisdom: this the Lord called ‘foolishness’ and ‘chose the foolish things of the world’ to confound even philosophy itself. For philosophy it is which is the material of the world's wisdom, the rash interpreter of the nature

and the dispensation of God. Indeed heresies are themselves instigated by philosophy” and went on to mock the diversity of philosophical theories and thunder “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?”

His opposition to philosophy led to a profoundly irrationalist attitude, a sort of *reductio ad absurdum* of the Christian opposition to worldly wisdom originally promoted by Saul. This irrationalism is blatantly evident in *On the Flesh of Christ*, where he proclaims that “The Son of God was crucified; I am not ashamed because men must needs be ashamed of it. And the Son of God died; it is by all means to be believed, because it is absurd. And He was buried, and rose again; the fact is certain, because it is impossible.” In *The Soul's Testimony*, his irrationalism is linked to his fears about the effect of Epicurean materialism on Christian faith:

“Stand forth, O soul, whether thou art a divine and eternal substance, as most philosophers believe if it be so, thou wilt be the less likely to lie,--or whether thou art the very opposite of divine, because indeed a mortal thing, as Epicurus alone thinks--in that case there will be the less temptation for thee to speak falsely in this case: whether thou art received from heaven, or sprung from earth; whether thou art formed of numbers, or of atoms; whether thine existence begins with that of the body, or thou art put into it at a later stage; from whatever source, and in whatever way, thou makest man a rational being, in the highest degree capable of thought and knowledge,--stand forth and give thy witness. But I call thee not as when, fashioned in schools, trained in libraries, fed in Attic academies and porticoes, thou belchest wisdom. I address thee simple, rude, uncultured and untaught, such as they have thee who have thee only; that very thing of the road, the street, the work-shop, wholly. I want thine inexperience, since in thy small experience no one feels any confidence. I demand of thee the things thou bringest with thee into man, which thou knowest either from thyself, or from thine author, whoever he may be. Thou art not, as I well know, Christian; for a man becomes a Christian, he is not born one. Yet Christians earnestly press thee for a testimony; they press thee, though an alien, to bear witness against thy friends, that they may be put to shame before thee, for hating and mocking us on account of things which convict thee as an accessory.”

All told, anti-Epicurean references can be found in at least seven of Tertullian's works. He pouted about their “frigid conceits” and labeled Epicurean doctrines as stupid, and even suggested that Epicurus was not really a philosopher at all. While Tertullian's rants undoubtedly appealed to a certain mindset (specifically to the same sort of extreme authoritarian attitude that produced Tertullian's famously misogynist [The Apparel of Women](#)), they also exposed the intellectual vacuity of the traditional Christian hostility to philosophy. If mainstream Christianity was to survive against the ever-multiplying heresies, its theology had to be placed on a more reasonable foundation.

A subtle change can be detected in Tertullian's contemporary **Hippolytus of Rome**, whose *Refutation of All Heresies* marks the beginning of an attempted comprehensive theology that didn't simply dismiss the "wisdom of the world" out of hand, but saw fit to advance more sophisticated arguments against it. By the middle of the 3rd century A.D. the philosophical struggle between Epicureanism and Christianity began in earnest. The Epicurean sympathizer **Celsus** wrote *A True Discourse*, which was among the first works to directly challenge the veracity of the Christian scriptures and mock the essential irrationality of many Christian beliefs. Particularly irksome to Christians was his report of a Jewish story that Jesus was not the son of God, but rather the illegitimate son of a Roman soldier who went by the nickname of "Panther" (the Talmud also describes an illegitimate "Yeshu ben Pandeiros", though he supposedly lived at least a century before the Romans occupied Judea).

Several decades later, **Origen** wrote *Contra Celsum* in reply to Celsus, and **Lactantius** included lengthy arguments specifically against Epicureanism in [The Divine Institutes](#). Lactantius in particular shows how Christians were no longer content to argue for their position on the grounds of faith alone, but were beginning to embrace Platonic arguments in favor of divine providence, accusing Epicurus of falsehood in not recognizing the role of divine intelligence in ordering the cosmos; and also Platonist criticisms of Epicurus's ethics.

The Platonic trend became even more obvious in the 4th to early 5th centuries A.D. **Athanasius of Alexandria** repeated what was becoming the standard argument against the Epicurean denial of divine providence in *On the Incarnation*:

"In regard to the making of the universe and the creation of all things there have been various opinions, and each person has propounded the theory that suited his own taste. For instance, some say that all things are self-originated and, so to speak, haphazard. The Epicureans are among these; they deny that there is any Mind behind the universe at all. This view is contrary to all the facts of experience, their own existence included. For if all things had come into being in this automatic fashion, instead of being the outcome of Mind, though they existed, they would all be uniform and without distinction."

Similarly, the on-going fulminations against pleasure can be seen in a letter written by **Ambrose of Milan** to the Christian congregation at Vercellae in 396 A.D.:

"Epicurus himself also, whom these persons think they should follow rather than the apostles, the advocate of pleasure, although he denies that pleasure brings in evil, does not deny that certain things result from it from which evils are generated; and asserts in fine that the life of the luxurious which is filled with pleasures does not seem to be reprehensible, unless it be disturbed by the fear either of pain or of death. But how far he is from the truth is perceived even from this, that he asserts that pleasure was originally created in man by God its author, as Philomarus his follower argues in his *Epitomae*, asserting that the Stoics are the authors of this

opinion.

“But Holy Scripture refutes this, for it teaches us that pleasure was suggested to Adam and Eve by the craft and enticements of the serpent. Since, indeed, the serpent itself is pleasure, and therefore the passions of pleasure are various and slippery, and as it were infected with the poison of corruptions, it is certain then that Adam, being deceived by the desire of pleasure, fell away from the commandment of God and from the enjoyment of grace. How then can pleasure recall us to paradise, seeing that it alone deprived us of it?”

Jerome also capitalized on the anti-pleasure theme in *Against Jovinian*, where he denounces Jovinian as a voluptuary and heretical “Epicurus of Christianity.” But it was the task of the greatest apologist of them all, **Augustine of Hippo**, to complete the work of reducing Christian theology to a variant form of Platonism. Like his predecessors, Augustine continued to strongly emphasize the alleged incompatibility of pleasure with virtue and to argue against atomism and the materiality and mortality of the soul. Perhaps more interestingly, in his *Confessions* he tells the story of how Epicureanism had raised doubts in his mind shortly after his conversion to Christianity and how ultimately came to oppose it:

“Thine be the praise; unto thee be the glory, O Fountain of mercies. I became more wretched and thou didst come nearer. Thy right hand was ever ready to pluck me out of the mire and to cleanse me, but I did not know it. Nor did anything call me back from a still deeper plunge into carnal pleasure except the fear of death and of thy future judgment, which, amid all the waverings of my opinions, never faded from my breast. And I discussed with my friends, Alypius and Nebridius, the nature of good and evil, maintaining that, in my judgment, Epicurus would have carried off the palm if I had not believed what Epicurus would not believe: that after death there remains a life for the soul, and places of recompense. And I demanded of them: ‘Suppose we are immortal and live in the enjoyment of perpetual bodily pleasure, and that without any fear of losing it—why, then, should we not be happy, or why should we search for anything else?’ I did not know that this was in fact the root of my misery: that I was so fallen and blinded that I could not discern the light of virtue and of beauty which must be embraced for its own sake, which the eye of flesh cannot see, and only the inner vision can see. Nor did I, alas, consider the reason why I found delight in discussing these very perplexities, shameful as they were, with my friends. For I could not be happy without friends, even according to the notions of happiness I had then, and no matter how rich the store of my carnal pleasures might be. Yet of a truth I loved my friends for their own sakes, and felt that they in turn loved me for my own sake.”

From Augustine's correspondence with **Nebridius**, we can gain some insight into just how deep his inner anguish was at this time:

“But where is that truly happy life? where? Aye, where? Oh! If it were attained, one would spurn the atomic theory of Epicurus. Oh! If it were attained, one would know that there is nothing here below but the visible world. Oh! If it were attained, one would know that in the rotation of a globe on its axis, the motion of points near the poles is less rapid than of those which lie half way between them, and other such like things which we likewise know. But now, how or in what sense can I be called happy, who know not why the world is such in size as it is, when the proportions of the figures according to which it is framed do in no way hinder its being enlarged to any extent desired?”

Just as Augustine's writings mark the intellectual surrender of Christianity to Plato, they also reflected a sinister trend towards the persecution of non-Christians and heretics and the suppression of their writings in the late 4th century A.D., as is implied by this letter to **Dioscorus**:

“If, however, in order to secure not only the demolition of open errors, but also the rooting out of those which lurk in darkness, it is necessary for you to be acquainted with the erroneous opinions which others have advanced, let both eye and ear be wakeful, I beseech you, --look well and listen well whether any of our assailants bring forward a single argument from Anaximenes and from Anaxagoras, when, though the Stoic and Epicurean philosophies were more recent and taught largely, even their ashes are not so warm as that a single spark can be struck out from them against the Christian faith.”

Christianity, having become the official state religion of Rome and Byzantium by this time, no longer required mere argumentation alone—it had power, money, and status on its side, and a fierce intolerance of its rivals. Epicureans still had the Garden in Athens, but its ability to spread the teachings of Epicurus had been fatally hobbled. For the time being, the Christian faith had emerged victorious over the cause of human happiness and rationality.