

Ancient Christian Objections to Hellenic Philosophy

Post by “Matt” of January 14, 2019 at 2:51 PM

It's true that we can find objections and criticisms of Epicureanism throughout early Christian writings. As general rule, hedonistic philosophy is at odds with Christianity. Epicurean philosophy denies a providential deity, an afterlife and even the survival of a soul. So it shouldn't be shocking that this conflict arises.

EP has some great ideas to its credit, but none of which the Christian church was willing to adopt. The Church did however adopt many pagan philosophical ideas into its metaphysics, primarily from Platonism and Stoicism. But these ideas were in regard to abstract formulas in respect to deity, virtue and cosmological principles. In the eyes of the Early Christians, these were harmless ideas that could be freely utilized in the service of evangelism by bolstering intellectual interests.

However, there were some early Christian apologists that were rather hostile to philosophy general, not just Epicureanism.

St. Paul, Tatian of Syria, Tertullian of Carthage, and Theophilus of Antioch to name a few. To view their hostility of philosophy as just another “know-nothing” ideological group with an axe to grind with the vogue rationalistic schools of the day is to deny the reality of their message.

It should be understood that though the Judeo-Christian religions were by this time becoming infused with Hellenic thought (as were other Near Eastern traditions like Hermeticism in Egypt) at their core was non-philosophical religion, apocalypticism and mysticism. Before all the venerable philosophers, before Epicurus, before Plato, before Heraclitus, before Thales there were *only* myths and divine revelation.

These early apologists drew from an older tradition, not reliant on philosophical speculation. They attempted to show that Christianity and also the Jewish religion needed no intellectual philosophical bolstering. No need for the speculations of Epictetus or Aristotle to enhance the Gospels, the Psalms of David or the Law of Moses.

In regard to Christianity specifically, I believe it is important to view the religion as it truly is. Though the Gospels survive in a dialect of Greek, the common language of Hellenic philosophy, it would be wrong to assume that they are some sort of secular hybrid mishmash of Hellenized Judaism, Cynicism, and Stoicism as the basis of the religion that over 2 billion currently adhere to. That would be, in my opinion, an enormous mistake...It isn't a philosophy at the heart of the faith. What the early apologists attempted to do was proclaim an apocalyptic message of high antiquity. Far, far older than Greece itself.

Jesus Christ may be referred to as the *Logos* in the opening lines of St. John's Gospel, a philosophical word familiar to Hellenic audiences reading the Gospel at the time, but Jesus during his life referred to himself as "*bar'enash*" *the Son of Man*. A term completely unfamiliar to Greeks, but very familiar to Jews who knew the scriptures related to Enoch, Jubilees, Ezekiel and Daniel intimately. The message of Jesus was the coming of the Kingdom of God and the resurrection of the dead.

This isn't Hellenistic philosophy.

This is Judaic revelation. Christianity is not easily dismissed as a rival philosophy of Stoicism or Epicureanism, because the heart of the faith has to do with a supernatural occurrence that people simply believe. Jesus viewed himself as the Son of Man, the Elect One of God, that was foretold in ancient scriptures, scriptures that have familial relationships with demonstrably ancient legends from the Near East. Far older than any Hellenistic philosophical school of thought, the narratives in the Gospels and Hebrew Bible have antecedent relationships with the legends of Egypt, Babylon and Sumer, the foundations of human civilization. The proof of this is written in clay tablets in the ruined cities of ancient Iraq and on papyrus from Egyptian tombs.

The early apologists writing for a clear distinction between secular philosophy and divine revelation were not attempting to be fashionably ironic by attacking the vogue philosophical schools of the time, they were being faithful to a far more ancient tradition that has its roots in the oldest traditions known to humankind.

So, it all comes down to whether a person believes in what revealed religions have to say. If a person doesn't believe, then that person really has no reason to explore the ancient apologists and scriptures, since at their core is something imaginary and this can easily be dismissed as fanciful as all myths can be regarded as false.

Post by "Hiram" of January 15, 2019 at 8:35 AM

This is why Nietzsche, when he appointed a "new nobility" rejected the idea that things were true, or honorable, because they were "ancient". This is not philosophical thinking.

Post by "Cassius" of January 15, 2019 at 8:45 AM

"So, it all comes down to whether a person believes in what revealed religions have to say." << I definitely agree. It's a matter of "faith" in the end, and that is pretty much an issue of what

kind of evidence we are going to accept before we believe something.

Post by “Matt” of January 15, 2019 at 9:00 AM

There are certainly peripheral philosophical aspects weaved into Christian theology by later theologians and commentators. Primarily Platonic and Stoic. But these ideas are not the basis of Christian thought. They may enhance certain aspects of the theology, but not the overall narrative of the Gospel.

Plato and Zeno’s ideas have nothing to do with the miracles of Jesus healing the sick and resurrecting the dead. They have nothing to do with a Messiah in the lineage of David. They have nothing to do with the coming Kingdom of God. They have no part in the resurrection of the dead. Plato and Zeno certainly did not understand if you are a sheep at God’s right hand or a goat at his left. Nor did they understand that the tree of life that was denied to Adam is at the center of the new Jerusalem.

These ideas are the basis of Christian thought. It’s not philosophy at all.