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THE PHILOSOPHICAL AND BIBLICAL
BACKGROUND OF ATHENAGORAS

I

The earliest tradition concerning Athenagoras, the late-second century Christian Apologist, states that he was a philosopher who, at some stage in his career, had embraced Christianity¹. It is then no surprise that he adapted current philosophical ideas, in particular those of Plato as understood by contemporary philosophers, to serve the aims of Christian apologetic. This he accomplished in a subtle and convincing manner which did not compromise his integrity as a Christian thinker. To a greater extent than the other second century apologists Athenagoras freed his argument from the traditional Jewish framework and concentrated on Greek philosophy as providing a *preparatio evangelica*.

What was Athenagoras' precise philosophical background? Philosophy, in the second century of our era, was more concerned with ethical and practical problems than with metaphysics and the phenomenon of the philosopher-director, who provided the individual with a code of conduct, was widespread. This concentration on the ethical led to a wide diffusion of philosophy among the cultured classes of the Graeco-Roman world and so to a kind of popular philosophy, infused with Stoicism, which was a part of the regular course of education. It was in an environment permeated with this popular philosophy that the early Christians lived and worked. However there was also a more formal philosophy, taught in the schools, which is usually known as Middle Platonism. F.C. Copleston² has distinguished the period from the first century B.C. to the mid-third century A.D. as a period when the eclecticism and scepticism of the earlier period, seen in the tendency of the Middle Stoa, the Peripatetic school and the Academy to eclectic assimilation, continued to be a force. However a return to philosophic 'orthodoxy' is found in this phase and a great interest is taken in the founders of schools, their lives, works and teaching. This eclecticism and orthodoxy are to some extent in conflict in Middle Platonism which accordingly gives the impression of being an amalgam and transition stage. It is significant that Platonism, in Athenagoras' day, did not possess the lectures of Plato but only the more popular dialogues which do not suggest that Plato had left any systematised teaching as a norm to be handed on to his successors. Indeed certain of the Middle Platonists took over the Peripatetic logic on the grounds that this was more carefully elaborated than anything they had found in the Dialogues. In spite of this eclectic tendency, and to some intent in opposition to it, the Middle Platonists emphasised

1. Philip of Side in a fragment preserved by Nicephorus Callistus or some other late Greek historian: H. DODWELL, *Dissertationes in Irenaeum* (Oxford 1689) 488; PG 6. 182.

2. *A History of Philosophy: I. Greece and Rome* (London 1947) 382-3.

the person and *dicta* of Plato as a consequence of their profound commentaries on the Platonic Dialogues. Thus there arose a tendency to stress the *difference* between Platonism and other philosophical systems and this is seen in their works directed against the Peripatetics and the Stoics. Middle Platonism is primarily an amalgam of different tendencies with the 'orthodox' Platonic element uppermost ³.

A typical representative of second-century Middle Platonism is Albinus who taught in Smyrna in the years 151-2 ⁴. His importance lies in the fact that his works—particularly the *Didaskalikos* or Epitome—give a fairly complete picture of the Platonic philosophy as it appeared to a writer separated from Plato by a period of some five hundred years. Albinus held that God (whom he calls ὁ πρῶτος Νοῦς) is unmoved and operates through a lower νοῦς or world-soul which, although not produced by God, is yet moved by him. This Aristotelian idea of God was probably introduced into Platonism just before, or soon after, the beginning of the Christian era and it seems likely that the first Platonist to use Aristotelian philosophy was Eudorus of Alexandria who wrote a *Commentary* on the Metaphysics and emphasised the transcendence of the Supreme God or τὸ ἕν ⁵. From then on elements of Aristotle's theology became part of the Middle Platonist School tradition. Albinus, in addition to Aristotelian elements, made use of Plato's idea of a gradual elevation to God through various degrees of Beauty found in the *Symposium*. But in his psychology Albinus read Stoic elements into Plato identifying the Stoic ἡγεμονικόν with the Platonic λογιστικόν ⁶ and transferring the φυσικὴ ἔννοια of the Porch to Plato's theory of innate ideas ⁷. Albinus is thus a typical Middle Platonist who could fuse together teaching from different sources. E. R. Dodds says of him: "In his attempt to correct divergent views he foreshadows Plotinus: his complete failure to make anything coherent of them is one measure of Plotinus' greatness" ⁸. It is a measure of Athenagoras' ability as a Christian philosopher that he is not overwhelmed by this eclecticism but usually manages to adapt what he wants to serve the needs of the Christian Gospel.

Another factor in the complex philosophic environment of the second century apologists was the continuing debate between the various schools of Greek philosophy which went on throughout the hellenistic period. The Stoics had discreetly allegorised the Homeric gods so as to enable those who were philosophically inclined to continue to worship according to the tradition of their fathers. On the other hand the Academy had made such offensive remarks about the morality of the Homeric gods that it tended to oppose all Stoic doctrines and, in particular, the Stoic defence of the traditional cultus. The Academy, especially under the influence of Carneades in the mid-second century B.C., built up a catena of arguments against the worship of the deities of Homer and the poets; Jewish and Christian apologists were not slow to draw on this collection. The arguments took on a stereotyped form: for example, the Cretans say that they possess the tomb of Zeus—if he is dead then how can he be a god? The Egyptians worship animals such as cats, crocodiles and monkeys—could anything be more degrading or absurd? These and many other similar arguments are preserved in Cicero's *De natura deorum* and in Lucian of Samosata and they reappear in Athenagoras ⁹, as in other Christian apologists.

Another feature of the arguments in the hellenistic schools was the use of a collection of texts from classical authors as source material for the debates. The *Supplicatio pro Christianis*, Athenagoras' main work, is of high interest in that it preserves some of this material. Thus in *Suppl.* 5 Athenagoras quotes a fragment of Euripides:

3. L. W. BARNARD, *Justin Martyr: His Life and Thought* (Cambridge stet. 1967) 28-9.

4. Galen V. 41 K.

5. R. E. WITT, *Albinus and the History of Middle Platonism* (Cambridge 1937) 126.

6. F. C. COPLESTON, *op. cit.* I. 455.

7. R. E. WITT, *op. cit.* II.

8. CQ 22. 139.

9. *Suppl.* 14, 30 ff. For a description of the debates I am indebted to H. Chadwick, *Origen: Contra Celsum* (Cambridge 1953) 10.