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## The Image of Early Christianity in the Ancient Greco-Roman World

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### Abstract

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The rise and triumph of Christianity in various spiritual and social environments have contributed to change significantly the perception of the human being and of his role during his terrestrial life. Despite the fact that, in the early centuries, it was approached with reluctance by Greeks and Romans in particular, by who the man was appreciated according to his power of domination over other beings and not in relation to his power to forgive and love, Christianity maintained its message constant, while enshrouding it in new forms, adapted to the permanently changing contexts. The dissolution of the ancient world is also due to the rise of Christianity, which should not be understood as an inner faith of the human soul, but as a religion that imposed itself in the public spheres of the Greco-Roman civilization. In this paper, we will highlight the fact that both the Greco-Roman spirituality and the Christianity, as well as the assimilation by Christianity of the vast cultural space built by the ancient Romans and Greeks influenced definitively the further development of the European philosophical, artistic and theological consciousness. In this way, we will illustrate the manner in which the philosophical analysis is to be found in the Christian phenomenon, as well as in the works of authors such as Soloviov, Kierkegaard, Church Fathers, Nietzsche, Pascal, Berdiaev, Bergson.

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## 1 Introduction

The cross as a symbol of spiritual perfection, as a sign of love through the sacrifice that leads to the salvation of the soul from the darkness of the sin which opened the inferno was seen at dusk along with the words *in hoc signo vinces* (through it you will conquer) by the great emperor Constantine (306-307) before one of his decisive battles. Respecting those divine words and, as we are told by the historians Lactantius and Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea, he won the victory by placing on the shields and flags of his armies the sign of the cross. This moment marks the end of a dark era for the great religion of Christianity and the beginning of a new bright stage. After this event, the emperor Constantine, himself converted to Christianity, will provide the official Christianization of the Empire. But in order to reach this moment, Christians have faced the cruel persecution of pagan emperors and the hostile environment of ancient Huns and of the antique spiritual universe. Having modeled on Jesus Christ, the Savior and Son of God, as well as on the apostles, headed by the Apostle of the Gentiles, St. Paul, Christians have endured these centuries of suffering motivated by a vivid and lively faith in the words and teachings of the Gospel. In order to look forward to the meeting between Christian thinking and living, on the one hand and the ancient Greco-Roman world, on the other hand, as well as to how this new religion was seen at the beginning by the Greek and Roman civilization we must follow the road and the work of a preacher who held the most prominent role in this process of first contact between two different spiritual worlds, the one who in his epistles to the Corinthians and Romans founded the Christian doctrine, the Apostle of the Gentiles, St. Paul.

As the scholar Mircea Eliade shows it, the theology and kerygma of St. Paul are rooted in his ecstatic experience on the Damascus road when Christ speaks for the first time letting him know that he, a persecutor of Christians, will become the chief speaker of Christ in the most remote countries and the most diverse nations, with the Spirit of God accompanying him permanently” (Eliade, 2000: 433)

As outlined by Eliade, death and resurrection by immersion in water is a well-known mythical and ritual scenario, resembling a certified universal aquatic symbolism, but St. Paul links the sacrament of baptism to a recent historical event: the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Baptism does not only ensure a new life of the believer, but it also perfects his transformation into a member of the mystical body of Christ. The sacrament of Baptism is unknown to Judaism. Similarly, the sacrament of the Eucharist. Like baptism, Eucharist integrates the believer in the Christ’s Mystical Body, the Church. Communicating with the Eucharistic elements, he assimilates the body and blood of the Lord. For St. Paul, salvation is equivalent to the mystical identification with Christ, for those who believe they have Jesus in themselves. Redemption is committed by a free gift of God, namely the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This sacrifice and spiritual fulfilment is accessible to everyone regardless of their nature or affiliation. This general opening, this universal call that Christ addresses to all human beings is the decisive proof that St. Paul emphasizes in favour of the idea that God gives grace to all men who ask for it. Confirmation of this can be realized through the very life of the Apostle Paul (Eliade, 2000: 434) This theological concept, this new doctrine entered, as it was natural, in fundamental opposition with the vision of traditional Judaism, but also with Judeo-Christians from Ierusalirja. The openness to all philosophical and ideological orientations, calling their followers to the true path of salvation and eternal life, briefly, the universalism of Christianity preached by St. Paul is in

decisive conflict with the traditionalism of the Hebrew people who consider themselves privileged among other nations and therefore the only one entitled to receive God's blessing and Sacraments. But Apostle Paul was faced with extremely strong crisis even within communities and churches he founded. For example, the Corinthian believers craved for spiritual gifts or "carisma" of the Holy Spirit. This desire is the sign of the strong presence of ancient Greek theology within the early Christian community founded in the Greek space. For Christians who accepted this attitude, the gifts of the Holy Spirit meant freedom from land and not spiritual life. So, they thought they were allowed to receive everything: prophecy, the gift of healing, licentiousness. Apostle Paul severely reprehends these misguided individuals and reminds them that they are have been made from Christ's flesh, who they must honor through abstinence and prayer. As regards the faith that opens the way for the coming of the Holy Spirit, Paul puts it alongside the feeling of love showing in a memorable way the superiority of the latter on the former. (Eliade, 2000: 435) Love seems to be to St. Paul the highest virtue that urges his followers to overcome all temptations brought by the darkness of this world: "Even if I spoke with the tongues of men and of angels, and I would not have love, I am a sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. And if I had the gift of prophecy and if I knew all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I had all faith so as to remove mountains and if I did not have love, I would be nothing." (The Bible, 1999: 1123) However, St. Paul accepted the acquisition of charismas and the motivation of this gesture seems to be the mere need to translate the message of the Gospel in a religious language familiar to the Hellenistic environments. Through his whole approach, the Apostle tried to adapt to the spiritual universe in which he was preaching the Word of God, he attempted to compare different spiritual spheres with the stated purpose of making known "to the Gentile" the good news announcing the salvation of man through Jesus Christ.

This adaptability and openness to other conceptual nuances than the ones strictly Jewish or belonging to primitive Christianity led to the conversion to Christianity of large masses of people belonging to different religious cults. The message of the Gospel will be carried by Apostle Paul not only in remote regions of the Roman Empire, but also at the heart of this brilliant empire. Thus, as reported by "Acts of the Apostles", St. Paul will reach Rome where he will continue the mission of converting many Roman citizens, with himself gaining full status and full rights as a Roman free citizen (The Bible: 1093, Acts of the Apostles, 28.15,30,31)

Apostle Paul's authority in the old church remains unquestioned. He was the one to found, for the first time, the Christian theological thought, and he is considered the first Christian theologian. His work and spiritual mission will be followed by members of the first Christian communities and Churches. But Christians will be faced to centuries of oppression and persecution from the Roman imperial authorities and the public opinion of the great empire until the Church will triumph. As many historians argue, the fundamental reason of the outbreak of persecution against Christianity was the refusal to celebrate the imperial cult. This cult had a long tradition in the Roman Empire, but it imposed itself as a mandatory requirement since the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. The first of the Roman leaders to be proclaimed god among gods was Julius Caesar, to who was consecrated a temple in the year 29 BC. Emperor Augustus accepted the divine honours only in the provinces, with him being only "God's son" in Rome.

The deification of “good” emperors and thereby, the organization of the imperial cult, generalizes after Augustus. With the acceptance of the succession mechanism, all great kings who lived during the 2<sup>nd</sup> century were deified. Christians would refuse to submit to this cult and will bring upon them the harshest persecution. During these first two centuries, Christianity was considered in the Empire *religio illicita*, and the image of this religion was that of an illegal cult, a clandestine religion that could encroach on the order and principles of the Empire. Besides the crimes against Christians ordered by Nero, they also had to endure the hostility of public opinion. The emperors Septimius Severus, Maximin, Valerian, and in particular Diocletian will try the repression and the total destruction of Christianity through cruel and bloody methods. (Eliade, 1993: 443).

It should be noted in this context that before the major persecution occurred several attempts to bring the Christian vision close to the vision of Roman authority that saw in Christianity a direct danger to the Greco-Roman culture and civilization. Authors like Justin say that Plato and the other Greek philosophers have known this doctrine that was professed, long before them, by the prophet Moses, but all these attempts to justify and defend the presence of Christianity were doomed in that particular historic moment in which the Roman authorities saw in this new religion a current that was guilty of atheism and *lèse-majesté*, crimes, revelry and incest, infanticide and anthropophagy. These attitudes that deny the moral value of the human being could not be conducted by Christians, who would have dismissed them from the very beginning. But for the pagan elite, the essential of the Christian theology – incarnation of the Savior, his inflictions and resurrection – was incomprehensible, the mystery and fundamental truth of the new religion that pleaded for the human liberation from the darkness of sin through love, forgiveness, faith, accepting all people was smashing into the rough concept of the one who has to win, in order to dominate his neighbour by all means and especially through crime. Although the fundamental danger for the Church of that time is the persecution from the authorities, however, Christians will have to face the presence of other religious sects throughout the Roman Empire such as the followers of the mysteries of Isis and Mithra, of the cults of Sol Invictus or of the solar monotheism. In addition, heresies and Gnosticism were threats for the early Christianity, despite this negative image that Christianity at the beginning in the Roman world, despite harsh persecution that it had to deal with, the triumph of faith in Jesus Christ will soon be translated into historic action through the conversion of Emperor Constantine and the official Christianization of the Empire.

## **2 Testimony About the pre-Christian status of the Roman Empire**

About the pre-Christian status of the Roman Empire, about moral decay and lack of spiritual depth, in short, about the world that early Christianity had to face bearing the image of a religion that has to be destroyed, since it is a social danger, we find eloquent testimony evoked not only in the writings of historians, but also in those of philosophers.

It appears quite clear from St. Augustine’s statements (Augustin, 1998: 152) the fact that gradually, the image of Christianity was improving, in the eyes of the Roman public opinion, which began to look with much more tolerance at the new religion and to be reluctant to measures of persecution dictated by emperors on Christianity. The time of this important writing of St. Augustine, between 413 and 426 AD, was no longer an era of official condemnation of Christianity, which had to be looked at in a

whole new light after the Edict of Mediolanum from 313, given by Emperor Constantine the Great. Thus, it opened the door to strong criticism of Roman society on morality and religious consciousness, often comparing the simple and profound teachings of Christianity to the theological chaos of the gods worshiped by the Romans. St. Augustine is also the one who tried to find common points between the world of ancient Greek thought and the Christian spirituality in Romans' view, showing that great Greek philosophers intuited the existence of one God, with their works prone to be understood as propaedeutic to Christian teachings (Augustin, 1998: 493) St. Augustine seems to have also known the preaching activity of the Apostle Paul in the Greek world, his opinion about ancient Greek philosophy and how some of them do not contradict, by their thinking, Christian truths, but, on the contrary, they confirm them (Augustin, 1998: 491)

The Christianity of St. Apostle Paul is different from that of the Apostles through universalism and openness to different religious horizons. As outlined by Mircea Eliade, bordered in the frameworks of the apostolic teaching propaganda, Jesus only seemed to be a Messiah who came on earth in order to redeem Hebrew people. The Apostles' Christianity was Jewish, and it was the fulfillment of the hopes of the chosen people. Apostle Paul's Christianity preached a Messiah of the human being, a Savior of all people regardless of their structure and type, a Saviour who is essentially closer to the one described by the Gospel. (Eliade, 1993: 83)

As Eliade argues, Saint Paul underwent Hellenistic influences, with his language proving the knowledge of Greek philosophy and culture. But, as indicated by the great Romanian scholar, neither the Jewish messianism nor the Greek philosophy can fully explain St. Paul's thinking. The concept of death and rebirth of Christ is a religious conception, the result of a religious experience and not of a theoretical speculation, it is a mysterious conception. An undeniable fact is that in order to achieve success in his apostolic endeavour among the Greeks, apostle Paul adapted the Orphism to the Christian fact, so as the new religion to enjoy a positive image and be received by the Hellenic world.

The fundamental principles of the Christianity preached by the Apostle Paul, principles that can be reduced to the following ideas; a) Christ died for the human emancipation from Adamic sin; b) Man can be saved by dying and being resurrected in Him; c) The body is the abode of sin; d) being resurrected in Christ, sin is destroyed in the flesh, are essentially Orphic. Apostle Paul could not know these principles of Jewish law because Jews never had the intuition of salvation through the experience of death and resurrection of a god. Also, these elements are not found in any other mystical Oriental sect. (Eliade, 1993: 84)

We can state here that only the political intelligence and capacity of adaptability to different spiritual backgrounds, traits that Paul recognizes as originating in the grace of Jesus Christ that surrounds his soul and leads the facts of his apostolic mission determined the rise and triumph of Christianity on the land of the legendary Greece and the brilliant Rome.

As stated by the historian Jean-Pierre Vernant, the Athens that St. Paul meets on his apostolic way was deeply imbued with the cult of Dionysus. This god was integrated to official and civic structures of the Athenians and he was assimilated to the collective religious order. (Vernant, 1995: 81)

The rise and triumph of Christianity in these different spiritual and social environments have contributed to a significant change in the perception of the human being and his purpose during

terrestrial life. Looked at, in the early centuries, with reluctance by Greeks and especially by Romans, by whom man was appreciated according to his power of domination over the others and not according to the capacity to forgive and love, Christianity maintained a constant message, but it shrouded it in permanently new forms adapted to the contexts it used to meet. Thus the image of this religion in the ancient Greco-Roman world experienced a major improvement that culminated during the reign of Constantine the Great. As the Romanian philosopher Nae Ionescu showed it, the dissolution of the ancient world is also due to the rise of Christianity but not understood as a faith inside the human soul, but as a religion that imposed itself in social spheres of Greco-Roman civilization. (Ionescu, 1998: 93)

Another very important aspect of the interaction between the ancient Greco-Roman world and early Christianity is represented by the meeting between Christian experience and the thinking of ancient Greek philosophers. Both Plato and Aristotle have guessed the existence of the Christian theological universe and were placed, through their philosophy, close to this universe, preparing together with other factors, the acceptance of Apostle Paul's teachings in the social Greek environments. However, the differences between Christianity and Platonism are obvious, as stated by the Romanian thinker Petre Țuțea; "Plato has a demiurge who is not a creator, but a brilliant craftsman, since he is preceded by matter. The first idea of real creation was brought to history by Christians. (...)I once said, in a salon, that Plato is the motion of the spirit through eternity. When we think, we are all Plato. If I try to think of the universe I must move the Bible in the frozen universe of Platonic ideas. This is meditation." (Tutea, 1997: 81) The theological thinking of the Middle Ages as well as Patristics, will weave in a masterly way the philosophy of ancient Greek thinkers and the spirituality and Christian conceptions continuing the approach inaugurated by Apostle Paul. As outlined by the researcher Charles Autran in his work "Arian History of Christianity", not only the meeting with the Greek thinking and Roman mentality has marked the evolution of Christianity, but also the contact with other guidelines such as the Aryan religion. (Autran, 1995 : 185)

### **3 The Christian Phenomenon and Several Philosophical Analysis**

The fact is that both Greco-Roman spirituality and Christianity, as well as the assimilation by Christianity of the vast cultural space built by the Romans and ancient Greeks definitely influenced the further evolution of European philosophical, artistic and theological consciousness. Without these worlds and the paths they crossed, the entire edifice of European spirituality would not have known the sublime beauty of the Italian Renaissance or the profoundness of Patristics and the brilliance of German Romanticism. Amid this tradition, the works of some authors such as the Church Fathers, Nietzsche, Pascal, Berdiaev, Kierkegaard were made possible.

For example, here is the manner in which the fundamental ideas of Apostle Paul's thinking are to be found five centuries after Christ in the writings of the Church Fathers, such as the Letter of the Pious and God-bearer Thalassius the Libyan and the African to Paul the Presbyter: "only love unites God and the human beings, in the same spirit. True love was acquired by the one who does not have suspicions and words against his fellow humans. Honest before God and mankind is the one who does not try anything against love. Love without hypocrisy is closely related to the true word emanating from a

good consciousness.“ (\*\*\*, 2000: 13) The love preached by Apostle Paul is also tackled by St. Augustine in his famous book “Confessions” (Augustin, 1998: 475)

Much later, theological and philosophical views found in the Gospel are present in European culture through the works of great philosophers such as Leibniz, Descartes, Pascal. Here is, for example, how Blaise Pascal resumes the idea that opens the Gospel of John, who supports the idea that Christ is the Word of God shining and freeing the Adamic being from the original sin: ”In God, the word is not different from thinking, for he is real regardless of his effect, for he is strong, regardless of his effect, for he is wise.” (Pascal, 1998: 118). Another Holy Father, John Chrysostom takes over the teaching of the Apostle Paul that he examines in the work “The Pit” (Sfântul Ioan Gură de Aur, 2001 : 724)

Christian thought has been taken over and integrated into the concept of rare philosophical thinkers belonging not only to distant centuries, dominated by the authoritarian spectrum of official theology imposed by the Church. Thus, in the 20th century, authors such as Bergson or Berdiaev regarded Christianity in a new light, or more precisely, they discovered new facets of this millennial belief. Henri Bergson will emphasize that before Christianity, the ancient world was not aware of the feeling of value of the human being understood as a spiritual individuality, individuality that has to be respected as the highest creation of Divinity. (Bergson: 1998: 229)

Nikolai Berdyaev tried, in his work, an approach based on the philosophy of history, of the phenomenon of Christianity and of its reporting to the historical evolution of the world. Analyzing the presence of messianism in different peoples throughout several centuries, Berdiaev considered that: „If we take a deeper look at the history we can see that messianism is its fundamental theme, whether it is a true messianism, a fake one, an open or a hidden one. The whole tragedy of history is linked to the reality of the messianic idea, the permanent duality in human consciousness.” (Berdiaev, 1999: 220) About the famous distinction between the Kingdom of Heaven and the Kingdom of God, about the presence of this distinction in history, the Russian philosopher states in his latest work: „Caesar is the eternal symbol of power, of the state, of the kingdom of this world. There are two main views on the relationship between Caesar, the state power, the kingdom of this world and the spirit, spiritual life of man, God’s kingdom. This relationship is understood either in terms of dualism or in those of monism.” (Berdiaev, 1998: 54).

Also among the thinkers who have consistently pointed to the phenomenon of Christian philosophical analysis can be mentioned Vladimir Solovyov and Soren Kierkegaard. Thus, about the message of Christianity Solovyov states in his work „Spiritual Foundations of Life”: „Christianity emerged as the good news of salvation of the whole world. Since the whole world lies in evil, the path of salvation from this evil that rules the world was revealed to us by Christ through his fight and his teaching. Humanity has gone this way but only few have actually walked on it and the salvation of the whole world is still only good news.” (Solovyov, 1994: 69) And about the consciousness of sin, understood from a Christian perspective, Kirkegaard says in his work „Christian School”:

„But this consciousness of sin means absolute respect and precisely because Christianity actually wants to have absolute respect, Christianity needs to be willing to appear as a crazy or scary thing for any other viewpoint, so as the infinite qualitative focus might fall on the fact that the consciousness of

sin that is the right path to follow. The view that expresses the absolute respect can see the tenderness and merciful love of Christianity.” (Kierkegaards, 1995: 92)

A very special philosophical position towards Christianity and spirituality of ancient Greece belongs to the German thinker Friedrich Nietzsche. He will criticize the Christian theological and philosophical conception, while advocating for a return to the spiritual values of ancient Greece, especially to the pre-Socratic thinkers, that Nietzsche considered to be genuine philosophers. (Nietzsche, 1998: 29) Nietzsche considers that with the work of Socrates, the populace began to have access to philosophy and philosophizing, degrading their nobility. (Nietzsche, 1993: 14) In relation to Christianity, Nietzsche essentially wishes for the neglect and even for the disappearance of this religion in favor of the old cults of ancient Greece, in particular, the cult of Dionysus, Zagregus, which for Nietzsche is the symbol of the vitality of life, the power unleashed in raw instincts name: „The illusion of Apollo: the eternity of the beautiful shape; the Aristotelian legislating must always be like this! Dionysus: sensuality and cruelty. The transience could be interpreted as enjoying the creative and destructive force as a continuous creation.” (Nietzsche, 1997: 649)

#### **4 Conclusions**

This ongoing concern for Christian and ancient Greco-Roman world and for the connections between the two worlds was manifested in circles of philosophers and theologians, as shown in the above mentioned fragments, from the beginning of the first millenium AD. Some thinkers were fascinated by the magnificent passage from myth to thinking that governs the ancient Greek world and they neglected the Christian message. As pointed out by Jean-Pierre Vernant, in his work “Myth and Thinking in Ancient Greece” between the two poles, myth and thinking seems to evolve the spirituality of ancient Greece. “From myth to reason: these were the two poles between which, from a panoramic view, seemed to have turned the fate of Greek thinking.” (Vernant, 1995: 18) Other thinkers have studied the Christian universe and tried to subordinate to it the universe of thinking in ancient Greece. This is the case of the Chruch Fathers or of Thomas Aquinas who, using the ideas of Plato and Aristotle tried putting theological principles on rational grounds. Both Greeks and Romans seek for Divinity and try to get close to the Absolute shrouded in doubts and queries: “Since the concrete platonic man is imperfect, as all things in the sensible world are, his only exit from limitation is the participation in the world of these ideas, for they are real, being located in the field of truth, as shown by Socrates in <Phaedrus>>> (Tutea, 2000: 84) As stated by Andrei Cornea at the end of his treaty “Plato. Philosophy and censorship”, the thinker who belonged to the ancient Greco-Roman world can be characterized by the following situation: “For the road is long, the ascension steep, the victuals – few; and the answer to the big question: Does God exist or not – once again, he is not here with us tonight,” (Cornea, 1995: 187).

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