

Learning from the Church Fathers (6)
Irenaeus of Lyon (c.130-200 AD)
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Many Christians in our postmodern times seem no longer interested in doctrine, confessions, or creeds. Those with the "latest" proposals to make the church relevant and relational are all esteemed and sought after. And for them to be called an "original" or "innovative" thinker is a compliment. For the church father, Irenaeus, however, to be called an innovator was an insult. As one writer notes, he would have been "deeply offended had it been suggested to him that he was an original thinker."

Irenaeus, the Bishop of Lyon (ca. 130-200 AD)

Irenaeus, whose name comes from the Greek word for "peaceful," came from Asia Minor, where, as a young man, he had heard Polycarp of Smyrna teach. His association with Polycarp, who in turn knew the apostle John, gave Irenaeus a deep appreciation for the unbroken continuity of the Christian faith since the time of the apostles. From Smyrna, he migrated to Gaul on the established trade routes to Lyon, which is now France's second largest city, a major centre of industry and finance. In 177 AD, the church of Lyon sent him to Rome as presbyter, with a letter for Bishop Eleutherus. It was also the year Christians in Lyon suffered grievously under the persecution of the emperor Marcus Aurelius. Soon after Irenaeus' return, Lyon chose him as the successor to Photinus, their bishop, who suffered martyrdom.

Irenaeus was a gifted leader with a real heart for missions. He preached in Celtic as well as in Greek in order to reach the native population with the Gospel. We hear of Irenaeus again in 190 AD. He was shocked when he heard that bishop Victor of Rome had demanded uniformity in the observance of Easter from the Christians of Asia Minor, who celebrated Easter on a different day than Rome did. The churches of Asia Minor regarded this demand as autocratic and offensive. Irenaeus wrote to Victor, pleading for tolerance in the celebration of Easter on different dates.

Heresies

Irenaeus lived in a strategic time, when false interpretations of Jesus were everywhere. About 187 AD, he listed about twenty varieties of Christianity. Many so-called secret teachings, myths, and poems were attributed to Jesus or His disciples. Various sects claimed to own Jesus' true legacy. They believed He was either a magician, a guru, an angel, or a prophet. One such sect was Ebionism. According to Irenaeus, the Ebionites used only the Gospel of Matthew, repudiated Paul as an apostate from the law, practised circumcision and other rituals from the law, regarded Jerusalem as the "house of God", and rejected the virgin birth of Christ. As a form of Jewish Christianity, Ebionism was neither Judaism nor Christianity, and after some centuries it died out.

Gnosticism

In the second century, there was also an explosion of Gnostic sects. The name Gnosticism

comes from the word meaning "knowledge". It was thus an intellectual, elitist faith that offered an attractive alternative to orthodox Christianity. Gnosticism had become such a potent force that it threatened to swamp the orthodox church. Gnostics believed they were the most faithful expression of what Christianity was supposed to be. They also taught that they did not have to abide by the moral standards that lesser believers had to obey. But for Irenaeus, Gnosticism was a ragbag of heathen speculations with bits taken from different philosophers to propagate a bogus, anti-rational mythology.

Although Gnosticism varied greatly, it was marked by one basic belief: matter is evil. The physical world and all its contents are fundamentally flawed and corrupt. Only the spiritual realm, uncontaminated by base matter, is good. Many Gnostics believed in a lower god, the Demiurge (Creator), who, through a combination of ignorance, created the material world and set himself up as its god. This was the God of the Old Testament, a God of justice and violence, who was supplanted by the true High God of the New Testament, a God of love and mercy. Gnostics believed that salvation for human beings consists of the spirit's escaping the prison of the flesh in which it is trapped. They rejected the saving work of Christ on the cross, and the bodily resurrection from the grave. Salvation could be obtained only by knowledge – by learning the secret teachings originally given by the divine being of Jesus. A modern-day form of Gnosticism is Dan Brown's novel *The Da Vinci Code* with its fictional conspiratorial theories about whether Jesus and Mary Magdalene had children.

Rejection of Gnosticism

The threat of Gnosticism led Irenaeus to write his five volume, *On the Detection and Overthrow of the So-called Gnosis*, normally referred to as *Against Heresies*. It is the only major work of his which has survived. According to Irenaeus, the gnostic writings are apocryphal. He fundamentally denies Gnosticism the right to be called gnosis, for Christ had proclaimed the only true and complete knowledge of faith to the apostles, who in turn wrote it down in the writings of the New Testament. He argued that the criteria for orthodox churches are the "canon of truth" and "rule of faith". Gnostics lacked both. He stated that the true gnosis is the traditional, orthodox Christian faith. "True *gnosis* is that which consists in the doctrine of the apostles, and ancient constitution of the church throughout the whole world, and the character of the body of Christ according to the succession of bishops, by which they have handed down that which exists everywhere."

Irenaeus' Theology

Irenaeus has been called the "founder of dogmatics." *Against Heresies* represents the first comprehensive theological system, which in many respects remained exemplary and influential for the future. Church historians recognize him as one of the major contributors to the emergence of a unified, catholic Christianity. He was also one of the leading figures to establish the canon of Scripture. He quotes from every book of the canonical New Testament except the Epistle to Philemon. His is the first and clearest example of the appeal to New Testament as the decisive norm and standard of the Church's doctrine. For him, it was essential to keep the path laid down by the authority of Scripture and in the clear tradition of the apostolic churches which was the best guarantee of resistance to innovation and dangerous speculation. He stressed that the coherence of Christian doctrine depended upon

the tradition of faithful instruction. He observed, "Because of its worthy origin, every church, that is, all believers, wherever they come from, must agree with this church; in it, the tradition going back to the apostles has been preserved by the believers all over the world."

Irenaeus has been called the first theologian of the "negative way", chiefly because of his insistence that we *never* know God "in his greatness" but *only* "in his love". Despite God's unknowability, we can know something of Him through the goodness of the created world. The world, created by God, is itself a potent argument for God's existence and nature. Only God truly exists; created things exist only in a secondary way because God keeps them in existence. In fact, God sustains the world from moment to moment.

Irenaeus often uses the image of God's holding the world in the palm of His hand. So God is fundamentally different from the world. Because He sustains it, holding it in His hand, He is very close to it. But Irenaeus' main point is the insistence that God is only known through his Son, and that therefore there can be no speculative or "neutral" knowledge of God, as the gnostics implied. He said that living in the truth means participation in the divine life and light – "seeing God and enjoying his generosity, living in newness by the Word, through faith in the Son of God and love."

The Fall of Man

Irenaeus had no notion of original sin or inherited guilt. According to him, the Fall of Adam and Eve is not a rebellion against God. It represents humanity's failure to rise to greater things, not a loss of original perfection. It should be clear that this is a quite different view of the Fall than taught by later writers such as Augustine. Irenaeus suggested that without death and other evils we would never repent. Evil comes from God; ultimately it serves a good purpose that things that seem evil, such as death, are planned by God. They help us learn about good and evil by experience and, ultimately, learn to choose freely what is right. But Irenaeus' view of the fall and origin of evil raises more questions than it offers answers. And it has no Scriptural basis.

Jesus Christ

Irenaeus regards the Son of God as the invisible Father made visible. As he puts it, "The Father is the invisible of the Son, but the Son is the visible of the Father." He lays little emphasis on Christ's death. His view of the atonement is based on the incarnation. In the incarnation, God is "born by his own created order which he himself bears." In these words, Irenaeus brings together the Biblical theme of a fallen creation with the incarnation. He argues that the Son "became man amongst men, visible and palpable, in order to abolish death, to demonstrate life, and to effect communion with God and man." As he puts it, "How shall man pass into God, unless God passes into man?"

Christ is Victor. Through Christ the powers of evil have suffered an irreversible defeat. Irenaeus also showed how the work of Christ should be understood in terms of salvation of the entire creation. God not only saved persons, but through the work of Christ, the restoration, renewal, and re-creation of the entire universe were foreshadowed.

Our Deification

Irenaeus' striking theology of the incarnation as the descent of God for the sake of human being's ascent has endured for centuries in a variety of formulations. The heart of his doctrine of salvation is the idea of adoption, understood in the sense of personal communion with God. When we receive the Logos, the true Son of God, God makes us adopted sons and daughters, and then we are able to share in the Son's incorruption. Irenaeus states, "For it was for this end that the Word of God was made man and he who was the Son of God became the Son of Man, that man, having been taken into the Word, and receiving adoption, might become a son of God."

Irenaeus was the first Christian writer to make the explicit point that the purpose of God's sharing human life is that we might share the divine life, the deification of humanity. Our "deification" is our transformation into the image of the obedient Son, the primary image of God the Father so that in the Spirit we may cry "Abba, Father" to God.

Conclusion

Irenaeus' theology survived and came to be recognized as a valuable resource long after his death. In modern times his views of the purpose of evil, have been very influential on theologians and philosophers of religion. His basic approach to theology remains central to Eastern Orthodoxy. Tradition asserts that he died as a martyr, but there is no certain evidence for it.

(To be continued)