

EARLY APOLOGISTS AND THE REASONABLENESS OF CHRISTIANITY

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Abstract: *Christian apology was born in the context of an environment hostile to Christianity, when it was an illegal and at certain times persecuted religion. The ancient apologists, who represent some of the most educated believers, set out to dispel existing misconceptions about Christianity – among them accusations of unreasonableness. This article aims to investigate the emphasis that authors such as St. Justin, Athenagoras, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Minucius Felix, and Origen, place on the necessity of using the rational faculty, and to clarify their views on the compatibility between Christianity and human reason.*

Keywords: *Early Christianity, Apology, Reason, Faith, Knowledge.*

The article is an attempt to clarify the understanding for several ancient Christian apologists concerning the compatibility between faith and reason.¹ For this purpose, at first, the context in which their reflections are set out is necessary to be clarified; and later the various paths on which they built and justified their understanding that Christianity is a religion possessing truth and rationality must be examined. The topic posed can be seen as a question of how, on the one hand, some of the most educated stratum of Christians in the second and third centuries tried to defend and explain the identity of their religion, so as to break down the intellectual barriers to its acceptance. On the other hand, however, to be successful, they faced the task of doing so in a way by which Roman society would eventually accept them as having something in common with the local culture.

The word “apology” (ἀπολογία)² – i.e., defense, defence speech, stems from

¹ This article is based on my dissertation in Christian Apologetics, entitled „The relationship between faith and reason in the writings of Ancient Christians apologists“.

² There are differing approaches as to which writers are included in the group of ancient Christian apologists - whether writers only from the second century such as St. Justin and Athenagoras, or also later ones such as Lactantius and Augustine. Here we adopt an intermediate understanding, which includes all Christian writers before the Edict of Milan whose writings clarified and defended the truths of Christianity. The group therefore includes the apologists of the second century, along with Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Marcus Minucius Felix and Origen.

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the Greek “ἀπολογέομαι” (answer an objection, defend),³ which refers to judicial defensive speech. The encounter between Christianity and the non-Christian milieu in the second century led to the necessity of writing apologies defending Christianity before it.⁴ The followers of Christ’s teachings had to seek points of contact with the pagan intellectuals, taking a more rational approach so that Christianity would be accepted.⁵ Christian apologists fulfill the call of the Scripture to all Christians to be ready always with meekness and fear to answer anyone who asks them for an explanation of their faith (cf. 1 Pet. 3:15).

In the second and first half of the third century, Christianity was not yet accepted by the Roman Empire as a legitimate religion and the society was hostile to it, although open persecutions were occasional and only local. On the other hand, during this period the majority of the members of the Christian Church were no longer Jews, but converted Greco-roman pagans. This made it necessary for the Christian message to be expressed through new forms of thought.⁶ Christian missionaries and apologists made great efforts so that the doubts and prejudices of the authorities, the pagan society and the intelligentsia could be overcome. However, their target audience was not only external – pagan, but also internal – Christian. Through the apologies, various misconceptions among Christians themselves can be overcome and they can be made aware of rational arguments suitable for their daily interaction with people who do not belong to the Church.

One of the accusations made against Christians was for underestimation or rejection of reason. It may also be due to a rejection on the part of some believers of philosophy,⁷ understood by pagans as a rejection of the importance of the rationality and knowledge. Christians, however, distinguish two different meanings of the word “philosophy”: as the pursuit of wisdom, and as the ancient systems of the Greeks and Romans.⁸ This provides them with the opportunity to express both positive and negative conceptions of it. In their explanations, Christian apologists aimed to show that Christianity is not one of the many cults of the empire, but a Divine teaching, which embodies and at the same time surpasses the noblest doctrines of ancient philosophy, and which represents the full truth. Here comes the question of faith and reason, which takes on the significance of a question also about the relation of Christianity to the culture of the time.⁹ The slanders against Christianity gave the apologists an

³ Sapundzhiev 1932, p. 1.

⁴ Barnard 1967, pp. 1–2; Tsonevski 1958, pp. 195–196.

⁵ Jaeger, 1961, p. 27.

⁶ Stefanov 1974, p. 3.

⁷ Posnov 1993, p. 116.

⁸ Karamanolis 2021, p. 27.

⁹ Lega 2023.

occasion to reflect deeply on the foundations of their own faith, taking the result of their labors to the public as well as to the members of the Church. They were, of course, very clearly aware that Christianity is a religion of Revelation. But something that is also true, and which they were at pains to emphasize, is that the highest degree of rationality is characteristic of Christianity.

In order to fulfill their main goal, the defense and justification of Christian doctrine in a hostile pagan milieu, the apologists set themselves two tasks. The first was to expound Christian doctrine in such a way as to remove the mental barriers, preventing its acceptance. The second was to show how Christianity differs from other worldviews, philosophical or religious, and why and how it was superior to them.¹⁰ In this way, according to the scholar Y. Velikov, they “*succeed not only in challenging the primacy of paganism, but also in implementing strategies and approaches recognizable to the educated elite, in an appropriately constructed apology for Christianity*”.¹¹

The Apostle Paul’s sermon at the Athenian Areopagus could be considered as the starting point for Christian apology. The name of the earliest known apologist is Kodratus. However, the actual founder of the apologetic movement was the second-century martyr and philosopher St. Justin.

St. Justin is famous both for his approving view of the possibility of compatibility between Christianity and ancient philosophy and for his martyrdom in Rome. His overall thought is characterized by trust in reason, confidence in its Divine origin, and the illumination of the reason by God.¹²

In accordance with the ambiguity of the ancient Greek term “logos” (λόγος), understood as word, reason and principle, but identified by St. John the Apostle with the Lord Jesus Christ, the Christian apologist regarded what was valuable in philosophical doctrines as due to the seed of the Logos (λόγος σπερματικός) which was scattered or sown by Him – Lord Jesus Christ. It is for this reason that St. Justin could conclude that “*whatever things were rightly said among all people are the property of us Christians*”¹³ – since they were inspired by the Lord Jesus Christ. And in connection with this mind-illuminating activity of the Divine Reason (Christ), St. Justin was even inclined to call some of the philosophers before the Incarnation – “*Christians*”.¹⁴

Before His Incarnation, the Lord, as one Sower, planted His seed among philosophers, legislators, poets, and among all men. They then knew the Logos in part, and therefore the mental conclusions they reach were partial. After the Incarnation, according to him, one can speak of a blessed knowledge of

¹⁰ Norris 1966, p. 34.

¹¹ Velikov 2019, p. 145.

¹² For more on this topic see Vatashki 2021b, pp. 93–106.

¹³ 2 Apol., 13.

¹⁴ 1 Apol., 46.

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the whole Logos – and therefore the knowledge that Christianity gives is complete.¹⁵ For this reason, in spite of his high estimate of the nature of philosophy in general, which is “*most precious in the sight God, to Whom it alone leads us and to Whom it unites us*”, he calls Christianity “*the only sure and useful philosophy*.”¹⁶

For him, philosophy is not limited to thinking, but also includes action. To be rational is not just to think right, but also to live right.¹⁷ To live piously means, according to him, to follow the instructions of reason. Again, the ambiguity of the word “logos” is used here: it speaks both of the precepts of our reason and those of the Divine Reason (Christ) – Who gave us our reason. The apologist identifies as “sensible” those who choose to follow the Savior’s instructions. To Him Christians render reasonable worship and, inspired by Him, they themselves live reasonably, that is, live a moral life.¹⁸

Another famous apologist of the second century was *Athenagoras of Athens*. Based on the available evidence, it may be assumed that he was originally a philosopher of the Platonic school of academics; that after his conversion to Christianity he continued to wear a philosophical mantle and to consider himself a philosopher; and that he authored an apology addressed to the emperors Marcus Aurelius and Commodus.

Athenagoras developed his apologetic activity in the context of persecutions against Christianity. His ultimate goal was to convince the Roman authorities, society and intellectuals that they must be stopped, showing that the Christian doctrine is reasonable.¹⁹ One of the main charges against Christians was that of “atheism”, i.e., that they did not worship the gods that the state and the people revered. This charge gave occasion to the Christian apologist to expound one of the most important Christian doctrines, which distinguishes Christianity from paganism – the doctrine of the existence of one God. Athenagoras built his defense of monotheism through philosophical argumentation (by way of reason). Important in his approach is his appeal to ancient philosophers, especially Plato, persons who spoke the language of the pagan society of the time and the same society would have recognized and accepted them as authorities.

Hellenic religion, according to Athenagoras, did not meet reason’s criteria for what true divinity constitutes. He accepted that God can be understood to a certain extent through reason (or mind) and that He Himself could be called “Reason”.²⁰ Human reason leads us to the idea of distinction between God and

¹⁵ 1 Apol., 44, 46; 2 Apol., 8, 10, 13.

¹⁶ Dial. with Trypho, 2,3, 8.

¹⁷ 1 Apol., 12, 13; 2 Apol., 2, 8. On the moral views of St. Justin see Merlo 1995.

¹⁸ 1 Apol., 12-13.

¹⁹ For more on this topic see Vatashki 2021a, pp. 75–82.

²⁰ Emb. for the christians, 4, 10, 16, 22, 23.

matter, to the idea of uncreatedness of God and the createdness of matter, and to the rejection of idolatry.²¹

The conclusion upon a reasonable analysis of the persecution against Christians and the slanders directed at them would show them to be ridiculous. The actions that are not guided by reason lead to those that are also devoid of justice. Reason also provides a reliable basis for faith in the resurrection of man, a doctrine revealed to us through Revelation.²²

According to Athenagoras of Athens, even the unaided, so-called “natural reason”, can come to the knowledge of certain truths about God, and some ancient Greek philosophers (such as Plato) are examples of this. These truths are a manifestation of wisdom, but an earthly one. It is arriving at certain plausibility by mental means. However, higher than earthly wisdom stands heavenly wisdom, to which Athenagoras refers the Holy Scriptures. In the Revelation, the full truth is present, and this distinguishes it from earthly wisdom.²³

Like St. Justin, Athenagoras before his conversion to Christianity was a philosopher, who after his conversion continued to wear the philosophical mantle and to consider himself a philosopher, but a Christian one. Common features for both are the search for points of contact with ancient thought and the striving for an objective judgment of it. Athenagoras, however, is a little more restrained in his conclusions, which is why they are not as vivid. At the same time, this Christian apologist places more emphasis on grounding Christian truths in the way of reason.

Athenagoras was one of the most prominent Christian minds of the second century. He is a testimony that Christianity, despite possessing the full truth, could look outward and appreciate the valuable elements outside it. Athenagoras' constructive approach demonstrates that ancient thought could be used in the service of Christianity without compromising the author's Christian identity.

Several decades after Athenagoras, Clement of Alexandria lived. In many aspects he is a continuator of the ideas of St. Justin, but he developed them. Clement was a person who used his various gifts as a writer, teacher, leader, preacher, Christian philosopher and apologist, in the service of Christianity.

Clement of Alexandria regard entering into faith as entering the doors of the Divine Logos. They are doors of reason (for He, as Logos, is also Reason) and are opened by “*the key of faith*”. The activity of the Son of God for the salvation of man and the perfecting of his knowledge may be called “*the remedies of reason*.” And the sacrament of baptism, by which the believer is received

²¹ Emb. for the christians, 4, 25, 27, 30.

²² The resurr. of the dead, 15, 17; Emb. for the christians, 1-4.

²³ Emb. for the christians, 4, 23-24.

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into the community of followers of Jesus Christ, may be called “*the water of reason*.”²⁴ Through these comparisons and figurative language, the Christian apologist shows the close relationship between faith and reason found in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Faith is a necessary precondition for knowledge. According to him, “Without faith, knowledge cannot follow.” But knowledge also follows as a natural consequence of faith. Therefore, faith leads to it. Faith itself is perfected by knowledge. At the same time, faith and knowledge are so related that Clement can say, “Knowledge is in union with faith, and faith with knowledge.”

Christianity has been called a “true philosophy,” to which knowledge in the proper sense is a characteristic attribute. Sometimes in a secular sense, faith is called a proposition founded on uncertain ground. This, however, is not the Christian understanding of faith according to Clement. In no way does faith represent something that is “doubtful,” “uncertain,” or merely “probable.” It has a perfect nature, and there is nothing it lacks. Faith is a trustworthy conviction of truth based not on human assumption, but on God Himself.²⁵

Human life may be regarded as a school in which we learn saving knowledge. The Word of God can illuminate our path to the truth, to the knowledge of the true God, so that our mind, which is our spiritual eye, may be enlightened. Enlightenment by the light of Jesus Christ leads to the rising of the light of knowledge. Faith itself can be defined as obedience to the Divine Reason – the Logos of God.²⁶

Those believers who possess a deeper knowledge of Christianity, Clement regarded them as true “gnostics.”²⁷ Such terminology may seem confusing, but what the author wants to show is that true knowledge belongs to the members of the Church who confess the true faith, and is foreign to heretical communities who only call themselves “Gnostics” but are not.

Knowledge for Clement of Alexandria is as much an act of the mind as it is a moral and spiritual state of the soul.²⁸ The Christian apologist recognized no value in knowledge, which remains only on the theoretical level. Therefore, he wrote, “We know the will of God by doing the will of God.” He also calls the virtuous life “rational.” And a rational life is one lived according to the commandments of the Divine Logos. Therefore, our actions that are not according to Him are unreasonable.²⁹

²⁴ The exhort. to the greeks, I, X; Christ the Educator, I.12.100.

²⁵ Strom., II.11.48-49; Christ the Educator, I.6.29.

²⁶ Strom., III.9.64.3; The exhort. to the Greeks, VI, XI; Christ the Educator, I.1.1; I.13.101-102.

²⁷ Strom., I.1.11.1-3; VI.18.164-165; VII.3.20.2; VII.7.41.3; VII.16.100.7; VII.16.104.1.

²⁸ Osborn 2005, p. 71.

²⁹ Strom., I.7.38.5; I.9.45.5; I.10.46.4; I.10.48.1; V.1.6.3.

Clement of Alexandria maintains a clearly expressed view of the reasonableness of Christianity, which he derives primarily from the Person of the Divine Master, Savior, and Reason – Jesus Christ. The faith of Christians for him is not an uncertain assumption, but a true conviction resting on real facts. Faith and knowledge are closely interwoven. Growth in faith can also be seen as growth in knowledge. To know for him is not only an understanding for the truth, but life according to it.

A famous apologist from the western half of the Roman Empire was *Tertullian of Carthage*. Known for his impassioned apology and some seemingly paradoxical thoughts, the Carthaginian was emphatically not an enemy of philosophy, nor was he a radical fideist, rejecting the importance of reason as it is often presented. Tertullian prioritized faith over reason rather than opposing them. He himself contributed to the misconception of his ideas, by his abruptness of tone as well as by his inconsistency in presenting them.

Several times Tertullian's statements were distorted or misunderstood, and among them the phrase "I believe because it is absurd" (*credo quia absurdum*), attributed to him, occupies a leading place. In this case 'absurd' is understood in the sense of 'foolish' and 'ridiculous', of something that is contrary to logic or 'common sense'. Thus it appears that one believes, because what is believed contradicts reason; or even that the more incredible and contrary to reason a thing is, the more trustworthy it is. This false-Tertullian thought has come to be interpreted by the public as a call for denial of rationality in the process of faith and as a claim for impossibility of a unity between faith and reason.

Tertullian's true thought, however, is expressed in a different way, and the meaning he puts into his words is different. Tertullian wrote, "*The Son of God was crucified: I am not ashamed – because it is shameful. The Son of God died: it is immediately credible – because it is silly. He was buried, and rose again: it is certain – because it is impossible*".³⁰

The context in which Tertullian places his thought is the resurrection, which the gnostics deny. He speaks of the impossibility, the unthinkability of resurrection by purely human criteria, not of the absurdity of belief or of resurrection in general. The Christian apologist regards the resurrection as impossible, not in the sense of unrealizable, but as inconceivable to the mind of man because of its supernatural character; as something beyond man's ability to comprehend, as a reality which man cannot perceive without the aid of grace,³¹ without his mind being enlightened by it. The resurrection is the truth of Revelation.

Tertullian's view that there are certain matters, which cannot be grasped by the human mind, is not tantamount to a denial of its value and necessity of use.

³⁰ On the flesh of Christ, 5.

³¹ Florovski 2012, pp. 19–20.

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In Tertullian, there is no logophobia whatsoever.³² The thought of the Christian apologist under discussion concerns not the Christian attitude to reason but the pagan attitude to faith. It conveys the attitude of the unbelieving world toward the Cross of Christ, which is “a stumbling block” and “foolishness” to Jews and Gentiles (cf. 1 Cor. 1:23).

Tertullian does not regard faith as devoid of reason and knowledge. Rather, the very conversion to Christianity is seen as embracing a kind of knowledge. In his most famous work “Apology” Tertullian accused the persecutors of Christians of condemning believers only on private denunciations, without making any special *investigation*; accused them of having a hatred of Christianity arising from *not knowing it* (not from *not believing in it*, as one might suppose Tertullian’s position would be) – this lack of knowledge he called “ignorance.” Contrary to certain popular opinions, Tertullian defined Christians as rational people who enjoy knowledge. Moreover, he associated Christianity itself with the end of said ignorance.³³

In refuting false charges against Christians, for acts which, however, were done by some pagans, Tertullian, whom some charged with “extreme fideism”, sometimes regarded faith in one of its worldly senses, as the acceptance of something without argument. “Faith” he called the tendency of the authorities to accept unconfirmed slanders against Christians without examining them. Faith that is not a reflection of reality that is not based on facts he called “blindness.” “But,” the Christian apologist wrote, “*there are two kinds of blindness which are easily reconciled: those who do not see what exists believe that they see what does not exist*”.³⁴

It is obvious that he, whether or not he should be described as a “fideist”, does not accept this kind of unreasonable faith, but one that is concerned with investigation, with establishing facts and truth.³⁵ Certainly, the Christian apologist does not consider that anything which is unreasonable or contrary to reason is worth believing, and would hardly agree with the opinion of himself as being “*the implacable enemy of every aspiration of human thought*”.³⁶

In his treatise “On Repentance,” Tertullian rejected popular opinions about the nature of repentance, which he admitted that he himself once held. He defines this former state as residing “*in blindness, without the light of God*.” Tertullian said that those who hold such erroneous opinions concerning repentance

³² Kuraev 2007, p. 56.

³³ Apology, I; III.

³⁴ Apology, II; IX.

³⁵ Apology, XLVI.

³⁶ This view is held by Archimandrite Cyprian Kern. He explicitly states that he is referring to Tertullian’s later writings, probably including „On the flesh of Christ“. https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Kiprian_Kern/patrologija-kern/ [2022])

were as far from it as they were from the Source of reason itself.³⁷ The apologist seems to bring up the subject of delusions concerning repentance in connection with the inadequate use of the thinking faculty. If the gentiles would accept God, the Source of reason, they would understand the innermost meaning of repentance, which becomes clear in the Church. In such a case, i.e., if they were in God, if they followed the dictates of reason with which God had endowed them; they would not dwell in “blindness,” but would be bathed by the light of God. Tertullian also calls the Son of God, Jesus Christ, “Reason.”³⁸

Tertullian assumes that the soul constitutes man as a rational being, in the highest degree capable of consciousness and knowledge.³⁹ A manifestation of unreasonableness is the sin. It comes from the devil, as well as the unreasonableness. Whether Tertullian means that Satan, in his rebellion against God, commits the first sin ever (and therefore the first unreasonable act), or whether he incites men to sinful living, the Christian theologian does not specify. However, it is a fact that he expressly says that unreasonableness is alien to God.⁴⁰

There are other reflections in “On Repentance,” which again show the high importance which the apologist attaches to reason: *“Reason, in fact, is a thing of God, inasmuch as there is nothing which God the Maker of all has not provided, disposed, ordained by reason – nothing which He has not willed should be handled and understood by reason.”*⁴¹

So reason is of universal importance in human life, including in a spiritual and moral matter such as repentance – from which it follows that the spiritual realm, according to the apologist, is not alien to reason. Of course, he does not mean that reason should be the ultimate criterion of everything, as the Enlightenment rationalism claims, but only that in our lives we should actively make use of reason and its judgment. Moreover, Tertullian holds that such is God’s decree for us. And those who are unwilling to accept God do not want anything of his, including reason: *“All, therefore, who are ignorant of God, must necessarily be ignorant also of a thing which is His, because no treasure-house at all is accessible to strangers. And thus, voyaging all the universal course of life without the rudder of reason, they know not how to shun the hurricane which is impending over the world.”*⁴²

For Tertullian, the priority was on emphasizing the differences between Christianity and the world rather than on seeking any similarity, and the danger of mixing the two was seen as a hypothesis almost forbidding any attempt

³⁷ On repentance, I.

³⁸ Against Praxeas, 5.

³⁹ The Soul’s Testimony, I.

⁴⁰ A treatise on the soul, 16.

⁴¹ On repentance, I.

⁴² On repentance, I.

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to seek interaction. The Christian apologist definitely places faith above reason, but has a high enough opinion of both, and of the compatibility between them. He does not, however, regard the Christian faith as “foolish,” “absurd,” “unreasonable,” “blind,” but regards it as resting on the firm foundations of Divine Reason and in accord with human reason; “foolish,” “absurd,” “unreasonable,” and “blind” it could only be in the eyes of an unbelieving man unenlightened by Divine wisdom.

Marcus Minucius Felix, author of the brief but famous apology “Octavius,” was another early church writer living in North Africa. He was originally a pagan, but converted to Christianity in adulthood. He describes his conversion poetically as a process of rising beyond the dispersing mists and the abyss of darkness and entering the light of true wisdom.⁴³ Minucius belongs to the well-educated upper classes of the population and possesses a good knowledge of rhetoric, philosophy, literary history and religion.⁴⁴ His treatise “Octavius” is described by J. Quasten as an admirable apology, distinguished by its nobility and elegance, in which the pagan point of view is presented with open-mindedness.⁴⁵

One of the participants in the dialogue is the pagan Caecilius. For him, as a skeptic, everything is doubtful and uncertain; he does not agree that people, who have no special education, money, and skills, to discuss heavenly matters. This elitist view narrows the circle of those who can to a handful of educated and wealthy people, and probably aims to exclude most Christians. Contrary to this thesis, Minucius Felix believes that truth can be known. According to the Christian apologist, by nature all people, regardless of age, sex, or social position in society, are “*born with the capacity for reason and with the power of understanding.*” Human rationality is not acquired through impersonal and blind fate, but is innate in man⁴⁶ – it is a gift from God. Every person could perceive the truth about God and the meaning of life. It is necessary to know Him before we can know what human nature is, before we can know ourselves. According to Minucius Felix, humans are endowed “*with the power of speech and reason which enable us to recognize, perceive, and imitate God.*” From which it follows that belief in God, knowledge of Him, and the possibility of likening oneself to God are related to reason. Because of this gift of reason, man is expected not to remain “*in ignorance of the celestial radiance which impinges*” upon him.⁴⁷

⁴³ Octavius, 1.

⁴⁴ Mathiassen 2014, p. 186.

⁴⁵ Quasten 1995, p. 158.

⁴⁶ Octavius, 5.2–6; 16.5.

⁴⁷ Octavius, 17.2.

For Minucius Felix the fact that reason is given to us in nature does not mean that we should limit ourselves to that fact; it does not mean that we should not make an effort to live reasonably. If we don't use our senses or reason, it invalidates the fact that we have them by nature. Moreover, we do not do so if we refuse to regard the universe as the finished work of a Divine Mind, but assume that it is a result of "*a random collection*" of various particles.⁴⁸

This reasoning is directed against the beliefs of the ancient atomists, but it can quite properly be applied to modern atheists, who refuse to acknowledge that *existence itself, order, and rationality* can only come from an intelligent Creator and Lawgiver. Instead, they see them as coming from blind chance, and argue their position with their belief in the power of reason. For Minucius Felix, there could hardly be any view that is further from the reason. For him there is nothing more obvious and undeniable than that God exists; that He possesses a transcendent intellect and sustains all nature.⁴⁹

The Christian apologist urges us to look into nature and into ourselves to perceive this. In doing so, we can come to realize that all things are created, sustained, and governed by God's providence; that order, balance, and beauty flow from creation. In this context of thought, the author calls God the "*supreme Artisan*," the "*perfect Reason*".⁵⁰

Like many other ancient Christian apologists, Minucius Felix perceives Christianity as the true philosophy or wisdom. The last is attested both by the teaching of Christians and by their holy life.⁵¹ In various teachings of the ancient philosophers, especially the teaching about God, there is an approaching to truth. According to the Christian apologist, it follows that it is "*open to anyone to suppose that either present-day Christians are philosophers or philosophers of the past were already Christians*".⁵² Of course, this conclusion is based on some of the philosophers' views about God, and does not characterize all the ideas of ancient thinkers. Minucius Felix does not argue that Christianity is in accord with philosophy, but, conversely, that philosophy is, to some extent, in accord with Christianity.⁵³

Marcus Minucius Felix, in his theological thought, builds a strong connection between faith and reason, pointing out that reason is a God-given gift to man, which humans must develop, and which ultimately leads us to Him who is Himself perfect Reason. And by examining creation, by the ability given to

⁴⁸ Octavius, 17.3.

⁴⁹ Octavius, 17.4.

⁵⁰ Octavius, 17.5–11; 18.1–3. Cf. Vatashki 2020.

⁵¹ Octavius, 1; 16; 38.6.

⁵² Octavius, 20.1.

⁵³ Baylis 1928, p. 175.

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us to think and understand, by listening to the Divine voice revealed through Revelation, by hearing His voice in the world around us as well as in our own soul, man could drop anchor in the haven of God.

In his main views, Marcus Minucius Felix differs little from Saint Justin and Athenagoras, without, however, directly borrowing ideas from them. It is to his credit that he communicated these views through high Latin among the educated classes of Roman society familiar with the works of Cicero and Seneca. In this way, he showed his pagan audience that education was inherent among some of the Christians of the time⁵⁴ and predisposed it to more positive attitudes towards Christianity. Minucius Felix's approach to Greek philosophy is constructive; it builds a bridge between classical culture and Christianity, and is a useful tool for evangelization.

It is difficult to speak of the early apologists without mentioning the name of Origen of Alexandria and his apologetic work "Against Celsus." Born into the family of the martyr Leonidas, he was the most famous Christian apologist of Antiquity, though he was better known as an exegete. His knowledge, education, and literary production certainly exceed those of other apologists.

Origen does not simply produce apologetic works, but theorizes the nature and methods of Christian apologetics. He sees apologetics as a rational activity of the thinking Christian, which, however, needs divine gracious support to illuminate human reason.⁵⁵ Its foundation is the Bible. The Christian with a firm faith maybe should have no need of apology, but it is not so with those whose faith is weaker – and here comes the role of the rational defense of the faith. Christian apologetics examines the arguments of the opponents of Christianity and responds to them.⁵⁶ Christian apologetics does not lapse into continual criticism, but strives for objectivity and is also willing to evaluate the opponent's truthful statements.⁵⁷ The best apology, however, is not the theoretical, but the practical: it consists in the pure moral life of the Christian who strives to imitate the Saviour – in this way the best answer is given to the critics of Christianity.⁵⁸

Despite the large Platonic influence on Origen, he has a balanced attitude towards ancient philosophy. The Alexandrian believes that the God-revealed Christian doctrine possesses a fullness of truth not present in ancient philosophy. In the latter, certain true insights are arrived at in a reasonable way, but

⁵⁴ Abad 2023.

⁵⁵ *Contra Cels.*, V, 1; VII, 1; VIII, 1.

⁵⁶ *Contra Cels.* Preface, 3, 4, 6; II, 20. III, 1; IV, 1; V, 1; VII, 1; VIII, 1.

⁵⁷ *Contra Cels.*, VIII, 76.

⁵⁸ *Contra Cels.*, Preface, 1, 2.

these do not lead ancient men to true worship of God – they remain idolaters.⁵⁹ As head of the Caesarean catechetical school, Origen advises his disciple St. Gregory of Neocaesarea to extract from Greek philosophy what might serve him as a “preparation” for Christianity.⁶⁰

According to Origen, the reason which man possesses elevates him far above the animal world and makes him in a certain degree related to God. For the Christian apologist the Son of God is the source of reason for rational beings and He makes His followers truly rational.⁶¹

Within Christianity, faith works in close contact with the human intellect. Faith is rational and through it, people come to rationality. It can be amplified by arguments, and the Christian apologist sees the necessity of their application. It is not only rational-logical arguments that have value for him, but also such as the moral life of Christians. In general, for the Christian apologist there is a close connection between intellect and morality.⁶²

In Origen's view, the Bible is the source of Christian doctrine and knowledge of it “*is the royal road to the knowledge of God*”,⁶³ which is why he gives a significant role to arguments based on Scripture. Such are the fulfillment of Bible prophecies and the miracles performed by the Lord Jesus Christ.⁶⁴ The mind helps for understanding the Christian doctrine. Gradual training and study, with the gracious support of the Holy Spirit, comprehend the Biblical meaning.⁶⁵ In composing theological views, Origen holds that both examples and statements found in the Bible could be used and those, which do not contradict it but are, arrived at because of “investigation”.⁶⁶ In general, for him the primacy of faith does not deter its rational justification.⁶⁷ Origen himself, as a teacher in the catechetical schools of Alexandria and Caesarea, took upon himself the task of working for cooperation between faith and reason in an ecclesiastical education; he tried to help for the creation of a Christian intelligentsia.

There are people of different intellectual levels among Christians, just as the case is in the world itself. It is undoubtedly better for someone to believe without rational grounds than not to believe at all. Rational argumentation can be

⁵⁹ Origen. *Contra Cels.*, VI, 2–5; VII, 42, 44, 47.

⁶⁰ A lett. from Origen to Gregory, 1, 2.

⁶¹ Origen. *Comm. on John*, I, 267; *Contra Cels.*, IV, 24, 25; *On first principle*. 1.2.4; 1.3.6.

⁶² *Contra Cels.*, IV, 66, 97.

⁶³ Trigg 1983, p. 86.

⁶⁴ *Contra Cels.*, I, 2; II, 38, 42; VIII, 9.

⁶⁵ *Contra Cels.*, I, 9; VI, 7, 37; A lett. from Origen to Gregory, 3. Cf. Crouzel 1989, pp. 73–74.

⁶⁶ *On first princip.* Origen's Preface, 10.

⁶⁷ Karamanolis 2021, pp. 115–116.

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learned at a later stage.⁶⁸ As the Christian apologist pointed out, faith is not confined to the religious sphere; it is a constant companion in human life, and many of our actions are conditioned by it. The most necessary and reasonable kind of faith, however, is that in God.⁶⁹ Lack of faith and knowledge of God is a calamity to man from which their presence delivers him.⁷⁰ Neither on earth nor in the kingdom of God is it possible to acquire full knowledge – only God possesses such. However, according to Origen, man's growth, begun in this world, will continue beyond.⁷¹

The importance Origen attaches to reason and knowledge in his writings, or his strong dependence on Plato's philosophy, cannot be regarded as valid reasons for presenting him as a "rationalist." Origen gives primary importance to the truth obtained through the Revelation, regarding reason as a means that enlarges the "*expanse of faith*"⁷² and assists for its deeper understanding. Although the Alexandrian places greater value on faith filled with reason than on faith devoid of it,⁷³ he also undoubtedly regards the presence of "simple faith" in a Christian as much more important than "high intellect" and learning, but without faith.⁷⁴ Or, more accurately, for him, "high intellect" without true faith, is in a sense impossible.

The Christian apologist should definitely not be considered some kind of "intellectual elitist." He simply holds that there are different levels of understanding in the "Christian life" and different groups of people belong to them.⁷⁵ He does not exclude the possibility that a person, depending on whether he has the time, the desire and the intellectual ability, can move from one level to another, nor does he underestimate someone. Such an answer can be given to W. Jaeger, who regards the distinction between ordinary and intelligent believers in Origen as seeming to conflict with the universality of the Christian message.⁷⁶

⁶⁸ Contra Cels., I, 9, 27, 29.

⁶⁹ Contra Cels., I, 10, 11.

⁷⁰ Contra Cels., IV, 6; VIII, 38.

⁷¹ On first princip., 2.11.5, 6, 7; 3.5.8.

⁷² Outler 1938, p. 196.

⁷³ Contra Cels., I, 13.

⁷⁴ Outler, 1938, p. 166.

⁷⁵ Crouzel 1989, p. 114; Alviar 1993, p. 126.

⁷⁶ Jaeger 1961, p. 56. The philosopher John Reynolds writes, „*Only Christianity can touch with the same story both the learned and the common man. As Augustine points out in his Confessions, the Bible is plain enough to communicate to those who are not at all interested in philosophy, but it is so profound that it has tested the intellect of the world's greatest thinkers*“ (Reynolds 2009, p. 67).

As we have seen, there are much fuller and richer conceptions of faith and reason in the work of the ancient Christian apologists than in the preconceptions of both modern fideists and extreme rationalists about them and Christianity in general. On the one hand, the apologists insist on the uniqueness of the truth revealed through Divine Revelation. On the other, having a Christian criterion, they compare the conclusions of reason with the truths of faith. From the extent of the interweaving of these tendencies, took shape the views of the various ancient Christian apologists on the question of the relation between faith and reason.

The activity of the apologists in defense of Christian doctrine itself requires a greater role of the thinking faculty in the field of religion. The emphasis on the mind is expressed both through the view of the inspiring activity of Jesus Christ, providing the possibility of arriving at certain correct conceptions, and in the consideration of religious truths as a kind of knowledge.

An important place among the views of the apologists is occupied by the idea of the Divine origin of human reason. The Lord Jesus Christ is regarded as Divine Reason. At creation, He endowed human beings with reason. Thus, thinking can rightly be seen as a Divine gift to man, as a sanctified faculty that is applicable not only in everyday life, but also in the field of religion.

The apologists insist that the mind is not only related to reasoning, but also to righteous living according to the commands of Jesus Christ. To be reasonable is to live holy. And the criterion for such a life is Christian teaching. And in this sense the abstract thinker, the scientist, the academic researcher cannot be defined as reasonable; neither is any religious teacher or ascetic. Only the person who believes and lives rightly in Christ is truly reasonable.

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