

About the Way Greek Philosophers Plagiarized the Christians

Landmarks in Modern Exegesis

Rodica Pop

Department of Culture of Iasi County under the Ministry of Culture of Romania

Iasi, Romania

E-mail: rodica31pop@yahoo.com

Abstract—Christianity appeared in the Judaic cultural space, but shortly afterwards, it spread all over the entire Roman Empire that it conquered without weapons, paradoxically, despite all Jewish rebellions that aimed at weakening the Roman power of domination over their country. The Christian message was received with an increased interest by the citizens of the empire and it ended – though even today, there are different forms of interpretation and living the Word of Christ – by creating a synthesis between the Greek classical culture and its own ideas or doctrines. In this process which has lasted for centuries, the Fathers of the Church have noticed particular similarities between classical philosophy and Christianity. Moreover, people have started speaking about the theft of ideas, for which Plato or other great Greek philosophers were responsible, because they got in contact with the Judaic culture and they borrowed some ideas, without mentioning their source. In the present article, we will try to explain to what extent this thing would have been possible and which is the rational explanation for specific statements of the Christians (in the present case, Clement of Alexandria), which do not have solid arguments at the first reading.

Keywords—*plagiarism; Christianity; classical philosophy; Plato; Clement of Alexandria*

I. INTRODUCTION

It is undeniable the fact that ancient Greek philosophy is very much valued by the Christians, though we very well know that there has been a Christian literature of great influence which tried to minimize and even incriminate pagan wisdom. For some of the latter category, for example, the phrase that appeared at a specific time in the history of thinking, Platonian Christians was considered purely heretic. Time has shown something totally different: Greek philosophy showed signs that it needed Christianity not long after its appearance, through the appeal that Neoplatonism made to mysticism and Orientalism, exactly as Christianity needed Greek philosophy, due to the concepts it could provide in order to express the ineffable. Contrary to some opinions, the influence of Greek philosophy over Christianity was not “a matter of apostasy, but of progress”, according to a statement of Jaroslav Pelikan. The most eloquent and honest arguments, expressed in the most open way possible, which speak about the benefits of Greek

philosophy for Christianity come from Clement of Alexandria, in *Stromata* (though we cannot ignore Martir Justin the Philosopher, Basil the Great or Gregory of Nyssa, the last one being considered the most Platonian of the Holy Fathers).

Even among the ones that considered the old philosophical tradition useful for Christianity there were some who insinuated that Plato had not been original at all, but he found his source of inspiration in the Judaic culture in order to elaborate, for example, his theory regarding the genesis of the world. Modern exegesis speaks in this respect of a so-called “doctrine of theft” (the idea appeared at Philon, who was not a Christian, then at Martir Justin the Philosopher, Tatian, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria etc.), and we should understand out of it, in terms which are familiar today, that some Christian thinkers have seen a form of plagiarism at the Greek philosopher. Meaning, as long as Moses and Plato have stated the same things regarding cosmogony, for example, it is clear for the Christians that, chronologically speaking, Plato has taken over the ideas of the Jewish prophet.

The topic of the present text is the theme of plagiarism as it is generated by specific accusations that some Christians writers addressed to Greek philosophers, among them being Plato. Taking into account the fact that, in many cases, these accusations were followed by contradictory statements – for example, Martir Justin or Clement of Alexandria considered Socrates a ‘Christian’, because he was enlightened by Logos and he received ‘seeds’ of truth through divine revelation – we are interested to understand, following modern exegesis, the logics of these appreciations.

II. MODERN EXEGESIS, ABOUT PLAGIARISM

Christian writers have used the word *theft*. Modern criticism has preferred to speak about *plagiarism*, which has a bigger negative connotation when we speak about intellectual productions. This term does not have a very long history; it appeared for the first time in Germany in 1813, and it benefits from the attention of several scholars [1]. Eugene de Faye, in 1898, offered it a generous space in his work *Clement d’Alexandrie: Etude sur les Rapports du Christianisme et de la Philosophie Greque au IIe siecle*, but

Charles Bigg has coined the phrase *the theme of plagiarism* in 1913, in *The Christian Platonist of Alexandria*, though, in 1912, E. Stemplinger has very seriously treated the topic. Henry Chadwick has become one of the most important specialists regarding the relationship between Greek philosophy and Christianity, and in *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition*, published in 1966, he brings very interesting arguments regarding *the theme of plagiarism*.

After the research done by E. Stemplinger and K. Ziegler, the so-called plagiarism was known in Antiquity in three cases: 1. When the author tried to trick the readers by making them understand that the stated idea belongs to him/her; 2. When the entire work of somebody was published under someone else's name; 3. The mistake of mentioning the sources in compiled works which did not have aspirations of being regarded as literary works [2] [3] [4]. It is interesting the fact that these two scholars do not take into account the things mentioned by Clement of Alexandria in *Stromata*, where we very often meet accusations of *theft* addressed both to philosophers and to the other writers, without taking into account none of the three criteria. For Clement, a text was considered plagiarized when a clause was identical to another one or it had the same idea, though expressed in different words. Clement dedicated an entire large chapter to this issue, in order to prove "the unsatiable theft" of the Greeks or Hellenists, in general, making a very serious selection of clauses and fragments from Greek writers, that he mirrored [5]. All these represented for Clement a proof that the Greeks, "without their own will, they admit they have also stolen our truth [of the Christians, to be more precise] and they secretly spread it among the ones of their own kind" [5]. In order to support his words, he took Hippias of Elis as his witness (a sophist from the 5th century B.C., a contemporary of Protagoras and Gorgias), who said the same thing.

Consequently, if we made use of the criteria mentioned by E. Stemplinger and K. Ziegler in order to identify fragments from the works of the philosophers who used Biblical sources, we would have a problem. For example, Clement said "the émile of Moses, (...) the excellent Plato" was inspired by Leviticus 13.12-17 when he wrote the Laws 956a [6]. This quotation is not useful for us for bringing arguments on the topic of plagiarism, but, according to Daniel Ridings it is important because it underlines the importance that Moses has as a source of inspiration for Plato, for the latter has the inner drive of imitating the first [7]. Well, this happens if we admit that Plato really found his inspiration in Moses.

III. PLAGIARISM

A method of bringing one's style to perfection in Antiquity was the paraphrasing of model ideas [7]. Criticism has warned us that the effect of paraphrasing could be cancelled, taking into account that what had been considered perfect, through paraphrasing, showed that it could be changed. Criticism was preoccupied by the usefulness of paraphrasing in education, it was not a moral judgement. Consequently, the fragments in which a Christian writer believed he saw a paraphrasing of a Biblical text by a Greek philosopher cannot be used as a part of our documentation

on the topic of plagiarism. It is relevant the case of Clement, who quoted from Exodus 7.9, "If you don't believe, you won't understand either", afterwards he added that *adăugat că Heraclit of Efes* paraphrased this line: If you don't lose hope in what should not be seen as full of hope, you won't discover it, because it will remain undiscovered and unreached" [8]. Again, according to none of the three criteria, we cannot speak of plagiarism in the following situation. Clement said about Plato – for whom (in Laws 715e-716a) God is the One Who masters the beginning, the middle and the end of everything, and he attributed everything to 'the old law' (*παλαιός λόγος* – 'palaios logos') – because he referred to the mosaic law [8]. Consequently, according to Clement, Plato really gve credit when he should have.

The question that we are trying now to answer is this: why is so important for Christian writers to say that Plato stole, given the context in which, according to his desire of explaining the origins of philosophy, Clement of Alexandria has reached the conclusion that God is the source of all ideas, that all people who said bits of truth were inspired by God; and he clearly recognised that the Greeks were among the chosen ones, just like Martyr Justin admitted: "It's not only the Greeks who have unveiled these things through the reason of Socrates, but the same happened for the barbarians, for the Word Himself became a body and he became human" [9]. Clement was interested in the morals and theology of philosophers, not in what addressed to the intelligence or speculative spirit [10]. But because no one had ever spoken so beautiful and good about God, like Pythagoras and Plato, Clement had a special admiration for these two philosophers: "We do not receive all philosophy without filtering it, but the one about which Socrates and Plato speak about: There are many those who wear the Dionysus stick, as the ones that take part at initiation ceremonies say, but few of them are Dionysus (Phaedon 69c)" [11]. Moreover, from the philosophy of the stoics that he incriminated several times for having materialized God, Clement has chosen their morals, considered worthy of the greatest praise [12].

Normally, these things exclude the idea of plagiarism, but history has offered us a long series of Christian writers who have been preoccupied to underline the fact that the Greeks have stolen. Why have they done it? Daniel Ridings comes with a few possible answers expressed as interrogations [13]:

Is this the way in which they engaged in studying pagan literature and learned it?

Was it a way of showing that if the best Greek philosophers have appealed to Biblical sources, then the Christians that actually lead their life based on Gospel texts should not bother and search for the truth somewhere else?

Was it a proof through which Hellenists were shown that they can easily accept Christianity because their philosophers used precisely Christian sources in order to define their doctrines?

Was it a form of defence for the Christians against the accusations connected to a lower intellectual level, because

the teachings of Moses and of the prophets were admired by the Greeks?

IV. PLATO HAS SPOKEN THE TRUTH

We could find a more satisfying answer if we take into account two important elements from the works of Clement of Alexandria and Marsilio Ficino. (We have taken as landmarks two authors who are very far away in time but connected by a great passion: the philosophy of Plato). Clement chose to be eclectic when he wrote *Stromata*, “not in order to keep his freedom, but in order to choose among the doctrines of each philosophical school only what could serve to morals and religion. This is the point on which Clement always situates himself in order to judge philosophy” [14]. Eugene de Faye considers that in this way, we will more precisely determine the influence that philosophy had on his thinking.

In a letter addressed to Marcilio Ficino, the Bishop Iacopo Rondoni asked him if the doctrine of the Holy Trinity has its roots in Plato’s philosophy [15]. Ficino answered that the Trinity can not be found in the works of Plato, even if there are similar expressions in his case, but having a different meaning. On the occasion of this dialogue, but also in other situations, Ficino repeated what his predecessors had said: that the followers of Plato that lived after Christ have stolen many doctrines similar to the Trinity from the Gospel of John the Apostle and from the texts of Dionysius the Areopagite, and he mentioned, in this respect, Ammonius, Plotin, Amelius, Iamblichus and Proclus, underlining that they are also indebted to the Christians, just like Plato was indebted to Moses [15].

Eugene de Faye has no preoccupation for Marcilio Ficino, but his positive perspective regarding Clement can be considered valid for both of them. De Faye believes that the Greeks have taken some of the ideas from the Biblical texts, this thing was used by Clement to justify the usage of Greek philosophy according to his own wish. Here are the words of Clement: We look at their ideas (the pagan ones) as being our own, because they are all God’s and especially because the Hellenistic ideas have their roots in our learning; this is the reason why we discuss about them together with the pagans, because their soul is ready to listen to them” [16] [17]. Or: “We have shown that the torment of Hellenistic thinking was enlightened by the truth given by our Gospels; and, if it is not disturbing to say it, we have proven the theft by stealing our own truth” [17]. Or: “The learning of philosophical schools was stolen from the gift offered by God to the barbarians and was embellished with the linguistic beauty of the Greeks; some of these learnings have been stolen as they are in barbarian philosophy, others were misunderstood; regarding the other learnings, some of them were said being moved by the Holy Spirit, but they did not process them perfectly; others were said based on (...) human research and they were wrong. Greek philosophers believe that they have noticed the truth in a perfect way; but, as we have shown them, they have only partially seized it” [17]. Moreover: “I believe that Peter has clearly shown the one and only God, known by the Greeks in a pagan way, by the Jews in a Judaic way, while by us in a new and spiritual

way” [17]. And he continued: “Peter shows that the same God is the One who gave the two Testaments; for the Greeks, He is the One who gave the Hellenistic philosophy, through which The Almighty is worshipped by the Greeks. This thing will be seen in what I am about to say. The ones that have come closer to faith, including both the ones from Hellenistic philosophy and the ones from the learning of the Law, are all part of the same people, the people of the delivered. (...) They were taught by different testaments, but all the same Lord, they all believe in the word of the same Lord. Because God wanted to deliver the Jews, by giving them prophets, the same thing happened for the Greeks; out of all people, God has chosen the special ones and made them prophets speaking their own language, so they were able to receive the blessing of God and this thing will be shown not only by the Sermon of Peter, but also The Apostle Paul who says: Also take Hellenistic books, get acquainted with Sibilla! She will show you the only God and will tell you about the ones which are to happen. Take Histaspes and read him and you will find out that there is written there very clearly and understandable about the Son of God” [17].

V. BALANCED MODERN APPROACHES

We have chosen to offer these quotations, because we consider them relevant to the thesis of W. Bousset [18]. He considers the work *Stromata* has a problem regarding the coherence of style, meaning the fragments where the topic of theft is present are not at the high intellectual level of Clement and they contradict the positive opinion of the Christian thinker about philosophy. Bousset believes that these fragments were part of a foreign work, maybe a product of the Alexandrine catechetical school that Clement introduced in his writing, without us knowing the reason. Bousset made a selection of the suspect fragments, whose subject was “*der Diebstahl der Hellenen*” (the theft of the Hellenes, but no explanation is offered in order to help us answer our question) [19].

J. Munck rejected the theory of Bousset because of his method. Because Clement’s attitude regarding philosophy was a positivist one, says Munck, someone might use the same criterium of isolating foreign fragments about the negativist attitude about philosophy, thus interpreting the opinion of the author in a totally different way [20]. Munck considers that the idea of subordinating the Greeks to the Jews can be found all over *Stromata*, occasionally presented as theft, because the Greeks did not admit their sources and did not preserve the truth in its pure form, as they found it [21].

There are critics who have tried to neutralize or diminish the presence and importance of the topic of theft at Clement of Alexandria. For example, S.R.C. Lilla [22] is interested in the philosophers who have been in contact with the truth through divine revelation or the ones that have received the truth from angels or supernatural powers, stealing it and offering it to people. If Plato is subordinated to Moses, then the learning of Moses should enjoy great admiration. According to Lilla, Clement was preoccupied by showing the identity between philosophical doctrines and the learning from the Bible, which would “allow him to demonstrate the

divine origin of philosophy" [23]. Lilla sees in Clement's intention a form of argumentation in front of the tough accusations brought by Celsus, in The True Doctrine, according to which Judaism and Christianity are failed imitations of the fruits of Greek culture [24].

In this respect, the explanation of D. Wyrwa [25] is that, in fact, Clement did not actually take into account *plagiarism* when he mentioned Plato took something from the Jews. Continuing the demonstration, because Clement has never said that it is a bad thing to be subordinated to the Judaic culture, it means that, according to Wyrwa that we can no longer speak of theft.

VI. CONCLUSION

There are truly some clear statements made by the Christians, referring to the similarities between specific dogma of the Church and the learning of Plato, and it is claimed that the Greek philosopher has taken from the Bible the essence of its learning, but these accusations of *theft* are not followed by clear arguments which are convincing. It is interesting the fact that, at least in the case of Martyr Justin the Philosopher and of Clement of Alexandria, the accusation of *plagiarism* appears, but it is immediately followed by elements which underline the meaning and advantages of philosophy to the Christians. We tend to believe that those specific writers have introduced this topic in order to offer satisfaction to the people that can not escape from rational thinking schemata, meaning to the intellectuals who would have never admired the other arguments which would have offered meaning to the similarities between the ideas of Greek philosophers and the ones of the Christians, which truly have their basis in the power of Logos, of divine inspiration, of revelation. If Justin chose to say that Plato plagiarized Moses when he spoke about the genesis of the world – so he admits that many of the ideas are similar at these two – we believe that he did it because he forgot for a moment one aspect which receives a very large space in his works: the power of God, the fact that the Logos was given to people, even if they were not part of the chosen people. "The oblivion" of Justin is not caused by a neurological problem of memory, but by the way in which he chose to explain to non-believers something which cannot be explained and it only makes sense if you take into account the power of God and you believe that His way of making His presence known into this world and of revealing Himself to people does not respect physical laws or some human limitative and narrow laws. The Logos did not select the people who perceived It through revelation using human ways of thinking. Paradoxically, specific to the God of Christians, It revealed Itself to Socrates and Heraclites, just like It later revealed Itself to Moses and, later on, to the ones that followed the Word of God. A non-believer can not accept a piece of explanation which is deprived of reason, of logics. Therefore, Justin, Clement or Origene served non-believers a piece of explanation based on chronology, even if we tend to believe that this did not satisfy them entirely: Moses lived before Plato.

REFERENCES

- [1] Daniel Ridings, The Attic Moses. The Dependency Theme in Some Early Christian Writers, Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 1995, p.13
- [2] Stemplinger E., Das Plagiat in der griechischen Literatur, Leipzig/Berlin, 1912, p.49, 168-169.
- [3] Ziegler K., art. „Plagiat”, Paulys Real-Encyclopadie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft 20, 1950, 1964, p. 20.
- [4] Daniel Ridings, The Attic Moses. The Dependency Theme in Some Early Christian Writers, p. 14.
- [5] Clement Alexandrinul, Stromatele, în Scrieri, Partea a II-a, Colecția „Scriitori și Părinți Bisericești” nr. 5, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al BOR, București, 1982, VI.2.51-15.1; 16.1-2.5.1.
- [6] Clement Alexandrinul Pedagogul, în Scrieri, Partea I, Colecția „Scriitori și Părinți Bisericești” nr. 4, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al BOR, București, 1982, 3.11.54.2.
- [7] Ridings Daniel, The Attic Moses. The Dependency Theme in Some Early Christian Writers, p.14.
- [8] Clement Alexandrinul, Stromatele, în Scrieri, Partea a II-a, Colecția „Scriitori și Părinți Bisericești” nr. 5, II.4.17.4.
- [9] Iustin Martirul și Filosoful, Apologia întâia, în Apologeti de limbă greacă, Colecția „Scriitori și Părinți Bisericești” nr. 5, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al BOR, București, 1980, p. 170.
- [10] Eugene de Faye, Clément d'Alexandrie. Etude sur les rapports du Christianisme et de la Philosophie grecque au II^{ème} siècle, Ernest Leroux Editeur, Paris,
- [11] Clement Alexandrinul, Stromatele, în Scrieri, Partea a II-a, Colecția „Scriitori și Părinți Bisericești” nr. 5, I.19.92.3.
- [12] Iustin Martirul și Filosoful, p.170.
- [13] Daniel Ridings, The Attic Moses. The Dependency Theme in Some Early Christian Writers, p.17.
- [14] Eugene de Faye, p.170.
- [15] Marsilio Ficino, Opera, Tigerstedt 1974, I.956, Ep. 12.
- [16] Eugene de Faye, p. 171.
- [17] Clement Alexandrinul, Stromatele, în Scrieri, Partea a II-a, Colecția „Scriitori și Părinți Bisericești” nr. 5, V. 4.19.1.
- [18] Bousset W., Judisch-Christlicher Schulbetrieb in Alexandria und Rom; 1915, Gottingen, pp. 9, 19-20, 216-236.
- [19] Clement Alexandrinul, Stromatele, în Scrieri, Partea a II-a, Colecția „Scriitori și Părinți Bisericești” nr. 5, 2; I.17.81.1-5; I. 17.87.1-18.88; I.20.100.3-5; I.21.101-147; I.22.148-150; I.23.151-29.182; II.1.1-2, 3; V.14.89.1-141; V.4.19.1; V.855.2; VI.2.4.1-3.28VI.3.28.1-4.3812.
- [20] Munck J. Untersuchungen uber Klemens von Alexandria. Forschungen zur Kirchen-und Geistesgeschichte 2, Stuttgart, 1933, pp. 127-151.
- [21] Ridings Daniel, The Attic Moses. The Dependency Theme in Some Early Christian Writers, p. 20.
- [22] Lilla, S.R.C., Clement of Alexandria: A Study in Christian Platonism and Gnosticism, Oxford, 1971, pp. 13-28.
- [23] Daniel Ridings, p. 21.
- [24] Lilla, S.R.C., p. 34.
- [25] Wyrwa, D., Die Christliche Platonaneigung in des Stromateis des Clemens von Alexandrien, Berlin/New York, 1983, p. 298.