

“In what ways is the apologetic method of St. Justin the Philosopher a useful model for Orthodox apologetic work in the twenty-first century, and in what ways does it pose challenges?”

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Logos Spermatikos and the Spirit of the Age

Our father among the Saints Justin the Philosopher, also known in history as Saint Justin Martyr, was one of the first Christian apologists. During his lifetime in the second century, Christians were criticized and persecuted for disrupting the peace of the Roman Empire. Christians refused to participate in the pagan worship that the establishment claimed was necessary for the well-being of the Empire in order to hold back plagues and famines and to ensure victory in war. The critics misinterpreted several Christian practices, citing novelty, atheism, licentiousness and even cannibalism as examples of antisocial behavior that endangered the public good. Justin developed a method of discourse that referred the critics back to their own revered philosophers to show that Christianity was not a danger to Roman society because it was a *reasonable* religion. If the complaint was that Christianity was a novel upstart, Justin called upon his extensive knowledge of Greek philosophy to show that Christianity shared many precepts of the ancients:

For while we say that all things have been produced and arranged into a world by God, we shall seem to utter the doctrine of Plato; and while we say that there will be a burning up of all, we shall seem to utter the doctrine of the Stoics: and while we affirm that the souls of the wicked, being endowed with sensation even after death, are punished, and that those of the good being delivered from punishment spend a blessed existence, we shall seem to say the same things as the poets and philosophers; and while we maintain that men ought not to worship the works of their hands, we say the very things which have been said by the comic poet Menander, and other similar writers, for they have declared that the workman is greater than the work.¹

¹ St. Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, Book XX.

St. Justin believed in the theory of *logos spermatikos* which is the idea that God implanted a seed of His own wisdom throughout the human race. Whenever a pagan philosopher made a statement that corresponded well with Christian truth, this was because he possessed *a portion* of the truth. The entire Truth, of course, was Christ Himself, the incarnated Logos.

For each man spoke well in proportion to the share he had of the spermatik word, seeing what was related to it. But they who contradict themselves on the more important points appear not to have possessed the heavenly wisdom, and the knowledge which cannot be spoken against. Whatever things were rightly said among all men, are the property of us Christians.²

In modern society, Orthodox Christians encounter a vast array of philosophical beliefs. Would St. Justin's apologetic methods be effective in twenty-first century America? It is possible to detect evidence of the *logos spermatikos* among today's post modern skeptics? Can common ground be found?

"Post Modern" is a phrase commonly used to describe western (European-based) culture today. "Post Modernism" can be explained in this way:

Postmodernism is "post" because it denies the existence of any ultimate principles, and it lacks the optimism of there being a scientific, philosophical, or religious truth which will explain everything for everybody.³

St. Justin debated with men who believed there were ultimate truths, men who sought this truth because they believed such a truth could be found. St. Justin himself writes in his *Dialogue with Trypho* that he roamed from one school of philosophy to another, searching for the group that had discovered the truth.

However, the spirit of our age often denies that there *is* a truth that can "explain everything for

² St. Justin Martyr, *Second Apology*, Book XIII.

³ "Postmodernism", (Pbs. Org/faithandreason/gengloss/postm-body. Html) < 2 February 2015>.

everybody.” A common post-modern response is “That may be true for you but it’s not true for me” or even, “There is no truth.” For example, such a person might posit “You believe humanity is fallen and needs a Savior; that is true for you but it is not true for me.” When discussing philosophy and religion with someone whose concept of reality is this rootless, it is difficult to know how to proceed. One can’t reference the Bible, ancient philosophers or even the latest blog posting because everything is relative and ultimately meaningless. As Fr. Seraphim Rose has written in his book *Nihilism*:

“Absolute truth”: the phrase has, to a generation raised on skepticism and unaccustomed to serious thought, an antiquated ring. No one, surely — is the common idea — no one is naïve enough to believe in “absolute truth” anymore; all truth, to our enlightened age, is “relative.”⁴

However, I believe St. Justin’s methods can be effective for a different category of people. Not everyone has succumbed to post modern nihilism. For example, many people still have respect for the Bible; many people profess an admiration for the world’s major religions such as Buddhism; and many appreciate ancient religions such as Egyptian religion and Native American mythology. Many people attach themselves to a cult of admiration for certain authors, economists, or political scientists. If one is discussing the truth of Christianity with a person who, at the very least, believes it is *possible* to discover the truth, then I believe St. Justin’s methods can be effective. However, the conversion of souls is the work of the Holy Spirit and while we need to make a good effort, salvation is always of the Lord.

Returning to the theory of *logos spermatikos*, St. Justin believed that the wisdom of Christ — the Logos — was spread across the ages and that peoples all over the globe have received incomplete portions of the knowledge of the Logos, who Christians recognize as Jesus Christ. For example, when Plato wrote:

⁴ Fr. Seraphim (Eugene) Rose, *Nihilism* (Fr. Seraphim Rose Foundation, 1994) p. 12.

When speaking of divine perfection, we signify that God is just and true and loving, the author of order, not disorder, of good, not evil. We signify that he is justice, that he is truth, that he is love, that he is order, that he is the very progress of.⁵

...he was correct. This truth was planted in the pre-Christian world to prepare hearts for the coming of Christ. The same may be said of Gautama Buddha who became disillusioned with the idolatry of Hinduism and developed a system of ethics which compares well with the ethics of Christianity. Buddha was not a Christian; he lived half a millennium before Christ yet his Eight-Fold Path has many points of commonality with Orthodox praxis, such as right speech, right action, and right livelihood.⁶ The Buddha possessed a seed of the Logos but not the entire Logos, which is Christ Himself. One can speculate that when Christ descended into Hades after His Crucifixion and preached the Good News to the captives, the Buddha received Christ's message and was saved.

Examples from diverse cultures include foundational myths from many religions that speak of first parents who lived in an Eden-like, freshly created world who fell; legends of a Great Flood such as *The Epic of Gilgamesh*; Pharaoh Akhenaton's *Great Hymn to the Aten* which has similarities to Moses' Psalm 104, and so forth. Rather than pointing to these commonalities as evidence that the Bible, Judaism and Christianity are derivatives of earlier pagan religions as some skeptics claim, they actually raise the possibility that human societies retain dim memories of genuine primordial events and that they possess a fragment of truth. There are also stories of tribal groups that believed a savior was going to come one day who would forgive their sins and set everything aright. The Protestant missionary Don Richardson cites

5 "Plato Quotes", FamousQuotes.com (<http://www.famousquotes.com/author/to/105>) <12 February 2015>.

6 "Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood", *Buddha Net* (<http://www.buddhanet.net/4noble24.htm>) <2 February 2015>.

numerous examples of this phenomenon in his *Eternity in their Hearts*.⁷ If true, these accounts are good examples of St. Justin's theory of *logos spermatikos*.

Hieromonk Damascene (Christensen) of St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood in Platina, California has written a fascinating book that illustrates the concept of *logos spermatikos* very well: *Christ, the Eternal Tao*, which is based on the notes of the late Fr. Seraphim Rose. The Tao, defined as "the absolute principle underlying the universe," corresponds well with St. Paul's description of Christ, the Logos in his letter to the Colossians: "And he is before all things, and by him all things consist" (Colossians 1:17). The following is a passage taken from Lao-Tze's *Tao Teh Ching* as translated by Father Seraphim [Eugene Rose] and his teacher, Gi-ming Shien:

There exists a Being undifferentiated and complete,
 Born before heaven and earth.
 Tranquil, boundless,
 Abiding alone and changing not,
 Encircling everything without exhaustion.
 Fathomless, it seems to be the Source of all things.
 I do not know its name,
 But characterize it as the Tao.
 Arbitrarily forcing a name upon it,
 I call it Great....⁸

Following Justin's methodology, a modern apologist might find using this quotation from the *Tao Teh Ching* very efficacious when speaking with admirers or adherents of Chinese religion. One might say to such a person that "Lao-Tze did not know the name of the Tao but now we do know his name: It is the

7 D. Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts* (Bethany House 2006).

8 Fr. Damascene (Christensen,) *Christ the Eternal Tao* (Platina CA: Valaam Books) Preface.

Jesus Christ, the Logos.” Westerners who self-identify as “spiritual but not religious” often profess an admiration for Asian religions and may be surprised to learn that “Christ is the Eternal Tao.”

Since Justin’s purpose in writing his apologies was to persuade the Roman government to stop persecuting Christians by demonstrating from their own revered writings that Christianity wasn’t “unreasonable,” he didn’t strive to convince his readers (with the possible exception of Trypho) to convert to Christianity. This would, however, be the goal of a person using St. Justin’s methods in today’s context. The goal of today’s apologist is not merely to bring the person into a pleasant realization that “all religions contain a kernel of truth” but rather to bring the person into the very Kingdom of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. There is the danger that people will be satisfied with a Christless, Churchless Taoism (for example) and stop short of embracing Christ Himself. This is a danger in over-emphasizing commonalities in religions because it can lead people to believe that all religions are the same, that they all lead to God, and that none of them are ultimately or uniquely true. We find that we will have returned to the spirit of post modernism again.

There is also the danger of syncretism. Christianity cannot be grafted onto another religion as an attractive appendage. However, there is no need to demolish *everything* a person formerly believed. There is a tendency to look at a non-Christian religion and proclaim it is all of the Devil with no truth in it at all. In the light of the theory of *logos spermatikos* it might be more accurate to say that a particular non-Christian religion has some kernel of truth but these truths have become distorted. Christianity straightens out the distortions and offers salvation. It must be made crystal clear that only in Christ is there salvation, that any truth retained by a non-Christian religious system is nothing more than a pointer to Christ Himself. These partial truths are dim lights compared to the bright beacon that shines forth in the Old Testament, which was a tutor to bring us to Christ, the fulfillment of the Law and the corrector and completion of all that is mistaken and lacking in Christless religions.

Fr. Seraphim Rose said that an idol-worshiper is better than a Marxist atheist because at least the idolater knows there a deity outside himself that requires worship.⁹ Whether it is racial memory or *logos spermatikos*, there is a basis for fruitful conversation with someone who believes there is a god or gods. Unfortunately the spirit of the age is such that a depressingly large number of people lack even the faith of animistic idolaters. For these modern people, it is doubtful that Justin's apologetic method would be effective. (But with Christ all things are possible!)

In conclusion, if God has sowed "Eternity in their Hearts," if Justin's theory of *logos spermatikos* is correct, then a very effective (and possibly the best) way to evangelize a non-Christian person is to take advantage of this phenomenon, just as St. Paul did when he preached to the Athenians, using their own philosophers and pagan shrines to make his point:

For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found
an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD.
Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you
(Acts 17:23 KJV).

For those who believe truth *can* be found, this may be effective. For those who have lost all hope that there even *is* a truth, we can pray that God will use their very hopelessness drive them to the foot of the Cross where all hope is to be found.

⁹ Father Seraphim Rose, "Signs of the Times", Blessed *Hieromonk Father Seraphim (Rose)* (Greenview, CA: The Blessed Seraphim Hermitage) Compact Disc 2.

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