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GOD AND THE WORLD IN THE WORKS  
OF ST. IRENAEUS OF LYON

Irenaeus of Lyon belongs to the group of Christian writers in the early Church known as the apostolic fathers. Originally, Irenaeus was from Smyrna. The memories of his childhood are connected with Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna. He moved from his birthplace toward the West, and he took a part in the worldwide mission of the church. First he arrived in Rome, at the same time Polycarp was there. According to some sources he became a disciple of Justin Martyr, who at that time was teaching in Rome. After a while he proceeded further to the West, and became a missionary among the Celts in Gaul. Christianity in Gaul was based in the thought and manners characteristic of Asia Minor. At the beginning he was a presbyter, but after the martyrdom of Bishop Pothinos, he succeeded him in that post. During the period of his episcopate he produced five books against the heresy of Gnosticism, especially its late form of Valentianism. In his first book he detects all forms of Gnostic teaching going far back to Simon Magus. The second book is the refutation of Gnostic heresy, with the rational proofs that its doctrine is false. The third, fourth and fifth books are supplements to the refutation, which begins, in the second book. The content of the other three books is gradually exposition of the true doctrine, where Irenaeus provides the proofs from apostles, Jesus' teachings, the parables from Gospels and letters of Paul. 'On the Discovery and Refutation of Gnosis falsely so-called' or 'Adversus haereses' in five books is a brief compendium of Christian doctrine with additional instruction for catechumens.

Some scholars consider Irenaeus as systematic theologian. But he did not write as a systematic theologian. He was much more concerned with the practical life of Christian communities than in academic work. He writes with pastoral care for his flock, protecting them from the influence of false teaching. He is primarily a pastor and a teacher of the Church and his writings serve as a manual for behaviour toward the Gnostic heresy, addressed to other pastors.

His teaching consists of the influences of the different Christian traditions with which Irenaeus was familiar. This is mainly a combination of tradition from Asia Minor, Syria, Rome and Gaul, though it lacks elements from the Palestinian, Greek and Egyptian traditions.

Irenaeus like his fellow bishop Ignatius of Antioch does not belong to the intellectual movement of the early Church, but to the tradition which formed the foundation of the church life on common experience of liturgical and Eucharistic practice. Irenaeus cited Ignatius in a few places without naming him. He does not use the Ignatian concept of the monarchical episcopate. Nevertheless, Irenaeus as well as Ignatius was involved in a struggle against heretics and both through liturgical devotion and eucharistic practice created an identical approach to doctrine of Church. The theme, which concerned the identification of being with life and communion, reappears in more elaborate form in the philosophy of Irenaeus.

Before we take into consideration the key concepts of Irenaeus' work, we will give a brief exposition of Gnostic doctrines. The doctrine of the Gnostics was a mixture of Greek philosophy, theosophy, speculative cosmology and mythology mingled with their dualistic conceptions and mysterious and spiritualising teaching about Christ<sup>1</sup>. It is very difficult to determine the real origins of Gnostic ideas but it is obvious that they were products of cultural interchange between Judaism and Christianity. The esoteric doctrines of Wisdom were especially attractive for the well-educated middle class of Christians, which at the same time read the works of Gnostics and the writings of the Apologist. These teachings<sup>2</sup> consist of doctrines, which Jesus taught in confidence to the small group of privileged and Gnostics kept them in secrecy. This was the reason why Gnostics believed that they knew the real meaning of Christianity.

The method of Irenaeus was not only dealing with the contemporary Gnostic heresy of Valentinians, but he went back to their forerunners, showing the origins of false doctrine. The common thing for all Gnostics' system was that they found orthodox Christianity, based on straightforward creed, too simple. The mystery of the universe, according to the Gnostics is much deeper and complex than orthodox Christianity confesses. Depending on system, there are different explanations of the riddle of universe. The most popular was the Valentinian conception of the Fullness or Pleroma of deity, the least and feeblest of whom had, as a result of some fatal error, departed from the world above and brought into being this physical universe.

We will give the brief exposition of Valentinian system without taking into consideration other parts of its teaching, namely exegesis or moral doctrine. The common thing for all Valentinians is that they distinguished themselves from the Christians, but they maintained the names of Jesus, the Father and the Spirit as well as the other Christian terms. Establishing their identity, different than Christian they broke the tradition of Marcion and the other Gnostics. Although a heretic and the so-called 'first-born of Satan' Marcion and his

<sup>1</sup> Robert M. Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyon*, (Early Church Fathers, London and New York, 1997), p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Hans Lietzmann, *A History of the Early Church*, (Volume II, Lutterworth Press, London, 1963), p. 207.

followers declared themselves as real Christians. They stressed the ascetic aspect of Christianity, teaching that real Christian and believer have to break with the world and its affairs.

Valentius and his followers have a very developed conception of emanations from prior Aeons. According to Valentinian myth the Prior Aeon or Pre-Father/Pre-Beginning/Abyss and Thought/Grace/Silence emit Mind/Father/Beginning and Truth, which compose a Pythagorean *Tetrad*. Mind then emitted *Logos* and Life, which emitted Man and Church. Abyss, Mind, *Logos* and Man exist in pairs of male and female and they compose the firstborn *Ogdoad*. *Logos* and Life emitted ten Aeons more composing *Decad*, and Man and Church emitted twelve Aeons, the last of which was Sophia, composing *Dodecad*. *Ogdoad* including Silence and Abyss, *Decad* and *Dodecad* compose the invisible and spiritual Pleroma of thirty Aeons.<sup>3</sup> This myth is known as Ptolemaeus' system or 'Great notice'. Irenaeus finds the origins of Gnostic conception of Aeons in Plato's theory of ideas.<sup>4</sup> Of course, he does not go too far in his speculation looking for every stage of emanations counterpart in Plato's theory, but he stays on the position that Plato's theory of ideas was the source of inspiration for Gnostic system of Aeons. Thus, Gnostics Aeons constitute an ideal world, which serves as 'figure' or 'pattern' or 'image' for the sensible world.<sup>5</sup> Irenaeus proceeds with the question about the origin of the ideal world: Did God make it out of himself or did He receive it from some power above him. This is for Irenaeus the core of the problem. If the patterns or images are accepted from above then God is forced by some higher principles to act and his freedom is limited. This is not acceptable for Irenaeus, because it denies the creative freedom of God and at the same time it gives the eternal existence to the world apart from Him. He accuses those who 'are ignorant of God, poets and historians' maintaining that 'God is the slave of necessity'.<sup>6</sup> Irenaeus confesses that: 'God, the Creator, who made the world, is the only God, and that there is no other God besides Him, He himself receiving from himself the pattern (exemplum) and figure (figurationem) of those things which have been made.'<sup>7</sup>

In the Valentinian teachings large parts of reality stay out of God's influence. Being independent of God, these parts possess a certain degree of sovereignty. This implies that God is not sovereign and that he does not contain everything. It creates a gulf between God and beings not contained by Him. The starting point of Irenaeus' refutation of such concept is that God 'freely made everything, not moved by another but on his own initiative' and that He is 'the only Creator and the only Father, the only one who contains all and provides being to all'<sup>8</sup>. Irenaeus opposes to the Gnostic multiplicity of mutually limiting principles or little creators. The Gnostic conception of Aeons or little creators

<sup>3</sup> Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adv. Haer.* I, 1, 1-3; in Robert M. Grant, Irenaeus of Lyon

<sup>4</sup> Harry Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers*, (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1956.), pp. 261-262.

<sup>5</sup> Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adv. Haer.* II, 16, 1-2.

<sup>6</sup> Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adv. Haer.* II, 14, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adv. Haer.* II, 16, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adv. Haer.* II, 1, 1.

is unacceptable for Irenaeus because such a principle could not be called God and it could not be omnipotent. According to Irenaeus' conception fullness and omnipotence are two main principles, which he applies to the divine nature. These two principles serve as a foundation stone for God's freedom. First, the fullness or pleroma of God based on the fact that he 'contains everything' implies that there is nothing outside him. The Irenaeian standpoint is that God is enclosing all being in the sphere of his being and in the stays unenclosed<sup>9</sup>. Valentinians apply the notion 'unenclosed'<sup>10</sup> to God, but at the same time they maintain that there is more than one fullness of God. Irenaeus rejects this because if there is a something outside him He is not fullness anymore. This being according to Irenaeus 'will have beginning, middle and end in the relation to those outside of him'<sup>11</sup>. The relationship between fullness and what is out of fullness can be twofold. In the first case the fullness will be enclosed in some other fullness, which is outside of it. In the second case it will separated from it by same distance. This includes that there is a third kind of thing, which is between the first fullness and the second one and this 'tertium quid'<sup>12</sup> will limit and contain the other two.

God's divine nature does penetrate all things. But the portions of divine benefits do not depend on the distance from him. If we apply this concept the Christian God would not be different from the Aristotelian God<sup>13</sup>, and law, which rules in the cosmic hierarchy, will limit his power. God must be all encompassing and his power must be extended to all beings. The term 'enclosing' serves to express not only transcendence but also immanence. The notion that God is all encompassing means that there is nothing out of him, which can limit him externally. At the same time God stays unlimited internally. This means that God, who 'containing all things' is 'unified, not composite, without diversity of members, completely similar and equal to himself'<sup>14</sup>.

The idea of God's inclusiveness leads Irenaeus to introduce the second element of God's nature his omnipotence or his unlimited power. At this point Irenaeus makes a clear distinction between his conception of God and the conception which yields Greek monistic ontology. His God is not subject to necessity and his freedom is reflected in his unlimited power. The power of God is extended equally to all beings and everything depends on the will of the all-inclusive God. Thus the freedom of God becomes an aspect of his power. The aim of the doctrine of God's freedom is the refutation of Gnostic theory, which makes God the slave of necessity. Although God is the highest factor in an order, he remains subjected to this order, which includes and surpasses him. For

<sup>9</sup> William R. Schoedel, Enclosing, not Enclosed: The Early Christian Doctrine of God, in *Early Christian Literature and the Classical Intellectual Tradition*, edited by, W. R. Schoedel and R. L. Wilken, Paris, 1979, pp. 75 – 86.

<sup>10</sup> Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adv. Haer.* I, 1, 1.

<sup>11</sup> Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adv. Haer.* II, 1, 2.

<sup>12</sup> Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adv. Haer.* II, 1, 2.

<sup>13</sup> Aristotle, *De Mundo*, 397b, 30 – 35.

<sup>14</sup> Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adv. Haer.* II, 13, 3

Irenaeus God is not God if he is not almighty and free. Richard Norris<sup>15</sup> insists on the position that Irenaeus failed to express or conceptualise in a clear fashion the Gnostic concept of God. Instead of this he developed his own doctrine of God without awareness of doing so, which he directed against the Gnostic concept of God. However, this theory of Irenaeus is the great achievement in liberation of God from the necessity of Greek thought. Irenaeus rejects the Gnostic concept of redemption as reassertion of the unchanging natural structures of the cosmos. He introduces a new doctrine based not on the given world in which rules static and inviolable order, but the doctrine of the world as a creature of the all-encompassing God. This idea of God's freedom is the key notion for Irenaeus' meaning of redemption and it forms the frame for human history with God.

All-encompassing God through his *Logos* created everything, which includes mankind and the world<sup>16</sup>. Irenaeus introduces the notion *Logos*. However, his *Logos* concept does not have anything in common with *logos* theology of the Apologist. He rejects the analogy between the generation of the *Logos* and the uttered *Logos* of Stoics, made by Philo and Justin Martyr.

In Greek, *Logos* as the directive faculty which elaborates thought is one thing, and another is the organ by means of which 'word' is emitted<sup>17</sup>. For Irenaeus this analogy is the source of Gnostic erroneous conception of the generation of the *Logos* as a physical process. Thus, he criticises the Gnostic conception of the generation of *Logos* as a physical emanation:

“Those who transferred the generation of the expressed word of man to the eternal *Logos* of God and give the expressions a beginning and a genesis as they would give it to their own word. But how will the *Logos* of God, or rather God himself since he is *Logos*, differ from the word of man, if it has the same order and manner of generation?”<sup>18</sup>

The Monarchianism of Irenaeus' native land determines his *Logos* concept and he would have nothing to do with any essential separation of *logos*, or nous from the Father.

“But since God the Mind, all World, all operative Spirit, all Light, always identical and like himself (as it is right to think God and learn from the scriptures), processes and distinctions of this kind do not exist in him.”<sup>19</sup>

Thus, the relationship between Father and *Logos* is described in favourite paradoxes about the Invisible becoming visible and the Impassible undergoing suffering<sup>20</sup>, underlying the same nature of *Logos* with the Father.

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<sup>15</sup> Richard Norris, The Transcendence and Freedom of God, in *Early Christian Literature and the Classical Intellectual Tradition*, edited by, W. R. Schoedel and R. L. Wilken, Paris, 1979, p. 98.

<sup>16</sup> Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adv. Haer.* IV, 20, 1 – 3

<sup>17</sup> Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adv. Haer.* II, 28, 4.

<sup>18</sup> Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adv. Haer.* II, 14, 1.

<sup>19</sup> Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adv. Haer.* II, 28, 4.

<sup>20</sup> Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adv. Haer.* III, 16, 6.

He thinks of *Logos* in biblical terms, following the Proverbs 8: 23 of the Septuagint and St. John the Theologian. Irenaeus maintains that *Logos* or as he calls it Son is always coexisting with the Father at the first, before the beginning.<sup>21</sup> He conceives that the generation of the *Logos* was from eternity and explicitly denies a beginning of generation of *Logos*. Irenaeus knew of the Philonic twofold stage theory,<sup>22</sup> according to which the generation of the *Logos* precedes by an eternal existence in the mind of God. The teaching of the Gnostics is different in the point of external existence of *Logos* in the mind of God. They thought that *Logos* had a beginning of generation which was not preceded an eternal existence in the mind of God. By refutation of the Gnostic theory, Irenaeus develops his theory according to which the generation of *Logos* had no beginning at all, but also beginning did not precede by an eternal existence in the mind of God. For Irenaeus any conception of generation, which had a beginning and cannot be described as eternal, is unacceptable. His position is not as it is in the twofold stage theory to emphasise the eternity of *Logos*, but rather to show that generation is eternal or without beginning. At this point Irenaeus stops and he does not go further in explanation of the generation of *Logos*. For him it remains the unique miracle: “If any one, therefore, says to us, ‘How then was the Son produced by the Father?’ we reply to him, that no man understands that emission, or generation, or utterance, or manifestation, or by whatever name one may describe His generation, which is in fact indescribable.”<sup>23</sup>

Irenaeus makes a clarification between *Logos* and *Sophia*, which are identified in some of his predecessors. Before Irenaeus, Theophilus identified the Spirit with Wisdom<sup>24</sup> and he was the first to apply the term ‘triad’ to the Godhead. He replaced the baptismal formula of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, with a triadic formula of God, *Logos* and *Sophia*. Following Psalm 33.6, Theophilus states that the three days which preceded the creation of the sun and moon ‘were types of the Triad, that is, of God, and of His Word and of His Wisdom’<sup>25</sup>. Irenaeus writes in the same spirit:

“We have provided many proofs to show that the Word, that is, the Son, was always with the Father. ...the Wisdom, which is the Spirit, was with him before all creation.”<sup>26</sup>

A few passages after, Irenaeus defines the Godhead: ‘Therefore there is one God who by Word and Wisdom made and harmonised everything. He is the Creator, who assigned this world to the human race’.<sup>27</sup> The role of the Spirit is to prepare man in the Son of God, who brings man to the Father, and finally the Father confers on man the incorruptibility of eternal life<sup>28</sup>. The incorruptibility of eternal life is the core of Irenaeus’ thought. The idea of incorruptibility

<sup>21</sup> Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adv. Haer.* II, 30, 9.

<sup>22</sup> Harry Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers*, p. 200.

<sup>23</sup> Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adv. Haer.* II, 28, 6.

<sup>24</sup> Theophilus of Antioch, *Ad Autolyicum*, I, 7; 2, 18.

<sup>25</sup> Theophilus of Antioch *Ad Autolyicum*, 2, 15.

<sup>26</sup> Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adv. Haer.* IV, 20, 3 .

<sup>27</sup> Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adv. Haer.* IV, 20, 4 .

<sup>28</sup> Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adv. Haer.* V, 2, 3.

initially appeared in the epistles of Ignatius of Antioch. The same pastoral zeal leads Irenaeus to develop such an idea, which is not a product of intellectual speculation but the real experience of liturgical life.

‘But, being ignorant of Him who from the Virgin is Emmanuel, they are deprived of His gift, which is eternal life; and not receiving the incorruptible Word, they remain in mortal flesh, and are debtors to death, not obtaining the antidote of life’.<sup>29</sup>

The idea of immortality locates the life force directly in human life and it is in connection with the Eucharist. His conception of incorruptibility was derived from the relationship, which Irenaeus establishes between creation and Eucharist. Irenaeus as well as Ignatius gives the central place in his teaching to the Eucharist. He argues that fleshly bodies must inherit eternal life, because they partake of the Eucharistic bread.

‘For as the bread, which is produced from the earth, when it receives the invocation of God, is no longer common bread, but the Eucharist, consisting of two realities, earthly and heavenly; so also our bodies, when they receive the Eucharist, are no longer corruptible, having the hope of the resurrection to eternity’.<sup>30</sup>

According to the opinion of some modern scholars mainly from Anglican circles the Eucharist is an extension of the Incarnation. Montgomery Hitchcock<sup>31</sup> maintains that the Eucharist is extension of Christ’s creative energies. He makes a link between the Incarnation and the Eucharist. Gnostic disbelief in Incarnation implies that their celebration of mysteries cannot extend the divine power into human life. Gnostics treat gifts of creation as something created by the Demiurge and not God the Father. For them the bread and wine of Eucharist remain the food and the nourishment, without any relation to Christ. This is the reason why the spear of Irenaeus’ critic was against occult and esoteric Gnostic practices. For him by the Eucharist, the Church handed to mortal man the ‘medicine of life’ which united them with Godhead. The life or the new life is the key conception of Irenaeus teaching.

‘It is not possible to live apart from life, and the means of life is found in fellowship with God’.<sup>32</sup>

The Eucharistic experience leads Irenaeus to an identification of existence with life. This identification of being with the life is the same as in Ignatius. The origins of this identification lie on the one hand, in the biblical roots of the relationship between Eucharist and life, and on the other hand in combating heresies. The life of the Eucharist is the life of God. Only by participation in God, through the Eucharist man can gain life. Irenaeus’ concept of life is not life in the sense of Aristotelian movement which flows out mechanically from the interior of existence. Moreover, this is not the concept of life which modern

<sup>29</sup> Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adv. Haer.* III, 19, 1, the similar idea in Ignatius, Ephesians 20, 2: ‘the drug of immortality, the antidote not to die but live forever in Jesus Christ’.

<sup>30</sup> Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adv. Haer.* IV, 18, 5.

<sup>31</sup> F.R.M. Hitchcock, *Irenaeus of Lungdunum*, Cambridge, 1914, p. 87.

<sup>32</sup> Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adv. Haer.* IV, 20, 5.

individualism proclaims. The conception of life as a certain length of time between birth and death, is established on the idea that man is a creature who exists by himself. Irenaeus thinks initially of life as a separated existence, which has not its being in itself, but in communion with God. This kind of life exists within the Trinity and it is actualised within the members of the Eucharistic community. With the identification of life with communion Irenaeus locates the source of being in God. He does not proceed further and his interest mainly remains on created being.

Irenaeus' teaching about God and his world opens the way to the further philosophical development of Christian thought. The formulation of the tradition was carried on by the bright boy who was already reading the books in Alexandria when the old bishop finished his task in Lyon. Origen was the logical successor of Irenaeus, but his philosophy did not surpass the contribution of the theology of Irenaeus.

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#### БОГ И СВЕТ У ДЕЛУ СВЕТОГ ИРИНЕЈА ЛИОНСКОГ

Рад се бави оним списима светог Иринеја Лионског који се тичу односа између Бога и света. Свети Иринеј Лионски побијајући гностички системе, успоставља онтолошку разлику између Бога и света. Он разбија нераскидиво јединство грчке мисли која затвара свет и Бога у идеју космоса. На тај начин свети Иринеј избегава замку онтолошког монизма грчке мисли, а у исто време одржава божију трансценденцију. Свети Иринеј је тиме установио основу за нову хришћанску онтологију засновану не на нужности космичког поретка, већ на божијој слободи којом Он ствара свет. Оваква поставка је сигурно једно од највећих достигнућа ране хришћанске мисли.