Article

Intellectual Hegemony, Conversion Discourse and Early Christian Apologetic Literature

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Abstract: The present study aspires to catch a glimpse of a peculiar phenomenon in the history of religions, namely, the competitive character of early Christian apologetic literature in its attempt to confront head-on the non-Christian ideological life-world and, for that matter, to persuade the latter's adherents to convert to the new hierophanic message. More specifically, in this study I look into the hierophanic/religious/spiritual market of the first three centuries CE, focusing on its creating, perpetuating and promoting of intellectual hegemony interactions, while at the same time I explore the conversion discourse used by all parties concerned in order to win over the Other. Apart from other religions, early Christian 'Apologetists' faced predominantly Middle Platonism, Stoicism, Neopythagoreanism and, last but not least, Neoplatonism. In doing so they adopted a number of rhetoric and social strategies at hand; strategies that, although intended to turn the Other into the Same—which they did achieve, albeit gradually—ended up turning the Same into the Other as well.

Keywords: early Christianity; apologetic literature; hegemony; conversion discourse; Philosophies of the Empire; syncretism; hierophanic market

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1. Introduction

The Hellenistic (323–30 BCE) and Imperial Periods (30 BCE–c. 300 CE) could be described as a historical phase of the most pronounced inter-religious co-existence and exchange.¹ that now they belong to a truly global scale. See (Berger 2014). This phenomenon in the global history of religions is intrinsically related to what could be called 'the Empire condition', i.e., the sense of belonging existentially first and foremost to the broader sociopolitical entity of the world and, by extension, the sense of being conditioned by and responsive to whatever the world has to offer—as opposed to what one's birthplace or place of residing has to offer. Thus, during the aforementioned historical periods, human consciousness—apart from inheriting the core spiritual values of the so-called 'Axial Age' (Jaspers 1949; Eisenstadt 1987; Bellah 2011)—became the final recipient of diverse, complex and unpredictable processes of hybridization and syncretism, whereby the circulation and sharing of ideas, beliefs and practices from many a number of societies and cultures contributed to the emergence of new spiritual formations (Pearson 1975).

Early Christianity (30–300 CE),² both in terms of chronology and in terms of content, was part and parcel of the situation just described, and one could even say that in many ways it proved to be the most typical and refined case of the potentialities inherent within the hierophanic transformation of the ancient world at the turn of the first millennium CE. In other words, early Christianity came into being thanks to—and at the same time brought into being—what I would call a 'pluralistic hierophanic field'. The latter, amongst many other things, created what in more accurate terminology we should refer to as a 'hierophanic market' and not just as a 'religious market'.³ This field ('champs', to recall Pierre Bourdieu)⁴ or market comprised philosophical, religious and more generally spiritual views, and catered to a vast world population which was desperate for meaning. Additionally, in many respects, one could say that this desperate search for meaning was the result of the

complications that came along with the legacy of the ‘Axial Age’, a legacy which stressed the individual, but was subsequently challenged by the overwhelming structures of ‘the Empire condition’.

In some cases by sheer co-existence and in others due to the innate antagonistic character of the agents involved, the Roman sacro-scape⁵ was packed with multiple forms of competition—intellectual competition being perhaps the predominant one—regarding hegemony amongst the philosophical ‘schools’, the religions of the Empire and the myriads of cults. I would dare say that it is very important to keep in mind that there were no clear-cut distinctions between most, if not all, of these competitors, since in one way or another each of them was after the same ultimate objective: meaning and fulfilment. Nevertheless, apart from intellectual competition, there was also a peculiar balance operative between monopoly and pluralism—between the monopoly of State ideology and intellectual/religious pluralism. In effect, the former guaranteed the latter at the social level, but because both were hierophanic the possibility of clash was always lurking and thus inevitable. To put it otherwise, it was the very hierophanic dialectics that on the one hand allowed for the dynamics of the imperial system to function beneficially, and on the other hand put at risk the survival of the whole system

One of the most conspicuous traits of the hierophanic competition for intellectual hegemony during the times and age of early Christianity was the need to convert, to win over the Other. On their part, Christian thinkers satisfied this need mainly through their apologetic literature, i.e., writings that were ostensibly or truly addressed to emperors, philosophers, opponents of many sorts or, simply, their own communities. The 2nd and 3rd centuries CE constitute a real goldmine for anyone interested in exploring and studying the production of most of these ‘Apologies’. For the purposes of the present study, though, I will limit myself to approaching these texts as an interface between early Christian thinkers and their contemporary philosophical ‘schools’ of thought.⁶ Although there is a number of ‘Philosophies of the Empire’, such as Skepticism, Stoicism, Cynicism, Epicureanism, it seems that the most formidable competitor for early Christian thinkers was Middle Platonism, which in many respects combined most of the concerns of the other philosophical ‘schools’.

Another such ‘school’—somewhat marginal, of course, but still influential—was Neopythagoreanism, which proved to be quite formidable as an opponent for early Christianity, since the hierophanic features and intentionality of the Pythagorean tradition were especially heightened.⁷ However, the question that arises is as to why and how (Middle) Platonism as a tradition came to become dominant and hegemonic. Additionally, this question is, as we shall see, pertinent to my study, for basically early Christianity and Middle Platonism followed, more or less, the same trajectory and adopted similar strategies of hegemony. More specifically, Middle Platonism became eclectic and dogmatic at once, whereas early Christianity became simultaneously open and closed. In other words, both of them opted for being appealing and demanding. This is something one sees even more in the case of Neoplatonism, which aspired to be not only eclectic but comprehensive, and not only dogmatic but exclusive.⁸ Ultimately early Christianity espoused an equally privileged recapitulating theory and practice.⁹

In the case of the writings of the early Christian ‘Apologists’ we see that intellectual hegemony was pursued through a certain typology of conversion discourse;¹⁰ a typology that made use of or reflected a number of strategies. In particular, (a) when conversion was sought after through active opposition to the Other, the strategies included ridicule, (moral and social) stigmatization, explicit calls for conversion and attempts to have prohibitions imposed against the group under fire; (b) when the discourse was focused on and directed internally to one’s own community, then what we can see is edification and the promotion of solidarity amongst members, argumentation about the Same, and threats of sanctioning against members; lastly, (c) when conversion discourse came as a defensive reaction to the strategies making up (a), one witnesses attempts amounting to information campaign, profile promotion and counter-argumentation.

2. Some Methodological Clarifications

The cardinal theoretical and methodological perspective that informs the present article is derived from the history of religions, but I have tried throughout my analysis to keep it relevant to what the history of ideas and more generally social history has to offer. At the same time, I have integrated as much as possible insights from communication theory (West and Turner 2000), along with substantial elements of discourse analysis (Paltridge 2012). Lastly, I owe the final twist for the articulation of what I hope to be a genuinely cross-disciplinary explanatory and hermeneutic viewpoint to some quite recent—and out of the traditional box, so to speak—approaches to the sociological study of religion (Stark 2007). Moreover, hierophanic dialectics, syncretism, ideological competition, hegemony (Adamson 1980), message, meaning, conversion, rhetoric, and the dialectics between the Same and the Other (Descombes 1979), are the most commonly used categories throughout the present paper, and the ones that form the backbone of my approach.

If the above categories reflect more or less traditional or at least established methodologies, those I have used from the most recent—and, admittedly, not unquestionable—developments in the sociology of religion are related to the religious economy theory and the so-called ‘religious market’. Regardless of whether one subscribes or not to rational choice theory (Eriksson 2011), upon which religious economy theory is based, it is only reasonable to assume that a certain amount of choice is always involved and indeed required in human—and, for that matter, religious—behaviour. Furthermore, to see religion only as a product or commodity and religious adherents only as consumers is certainly a form of reductionism, but one could hardly disagree that religiosity conforms partly to and reproduces in its own way the fundamental human pattern of satisfying needs. That religion as a need, even if that may be deemed ideological, demands participation and interaction, and not just mere consumption (Young 1997)—as if something like this did exist—is in many respects a truism. However, what is of particular interest herein is the insight that religion is a special product—a product that requires special treatment in order to be appreciated, but still a product. In this regard then, the broader religious economy theory, instead of a general theory concerning religion, can be utilized constructively in a qualified and moderate fashion.

The hypothesis that runs across the present study is as follows: by becoming more and more versatile and intense, the multi-hierophanic context of the Imperial Period produced competition in light of the desire for control on the part of certain hierophanic/religious agents, and thus led to competition for hegemony—if not monopoly—which in turn was pursued, amongst other means, by applying both theoretical and practical conversion strategies in order to win over the Other to the Same, but in the process also witnessing the Same becoming the Other. In the case of the ‘Apologists’ of early Christianity, this dialectical appropriation of the Other (in the guise of the philosophical ‘schools’ of the time) might be explained via the fact that in most, if not all, cases the ‘Apologists’ had some kind of personal background in the Other, but it certainly should be interpreted as a series of steps leading eventually to a new synthesis, that is, to a new instituting of the Same as the Empire’s dominant ideology in the centuries to come.

The largest part of this article is devoted to the investigation of early Christian ‘Apologies’ as case studies concerning the conversion discourse that these writings exhibit in their interaction with the philosophical ideoscape (Appadurai 1996) of the period. Undoubtedly, early Christian conversion discourse is not limited to the ‘Apologies’, since it can also be found in much of the broader systematic literature across the whole typology of early Christianity,¹¹ but it is in the ‘Apologies’ that one comes across the strategies, modes and motifs that are employed in the relevant conversion discourse in the most evident, direct and perhaps typical manner. A second clarification I would like to make is that due to the limited space of this article I could not possibly go through all the ‘Apologists’ and their multiple works in order to provide a detailed and thorough picture, and therefore I have opted for summarizing, on the one hand, the main points that the philosophy ‘schools’

brought up in the case of early Christianity and, on the other hand, presenting as succinctly and comprehensively as possible the response(s) one finds in the apologetic literature.

3. The Philosophers' Counter-Worldview

The philosophical 'schools' in the Imperial Period were not articulating their doctrines by responding to an alleged challenge on part of early Christianity, that is, they were not in any kind of defensive mode. They had their own age-long traditions that offered more than abundantly the conditions of possibility in regard to this or that teaching of theirs. However, this does not mean that they were not interacting—and in many cases quite dynamically¹²—with new emerging worldviews, many of which were being articulated by early Christianity. In this respect, it is at least methodologically prudent to examine early Christianity and the philosophical 'schools' of the time together and, for that matter, as giving jointly shape to certain aspects of their respective worldviews. In other words, in early Christian 'Apologies' we witness certain elements that were simply not there in the fundamental narrative(s) of Christianity and so their presence should justifiably be accounted for by looking into other fields, such as philosophy. Additionally, inversely, in the philosophical 'schools' of the Imperial Period one can discern certain religiously oriented developments that cannot be accounted for in light of Greco-Roman or more generally pagan sensitivities, and thus have to be explored in association with the new shaping force of Christianity. To be sure, of course, these interchanges were not always equally present but depended on a number of conditions, such as the degree of sociopolitical tolerance, the character of the agents involved, and so forth.

Sometimes views are presented as if the pagan world, especially during the period under consideration, developed through its own philosophers the idea of monotheism (Athanasias and Frede 1999), but if one should be accurate they should speak of *theomonism*,¹³ i.e., an ontological monism which in its most exquisite moments was experienced as the Divine. This is 'the God' Middle Platonism refers to and not some kind of unique and exclusive Deity; it is basically due to the most exquisite Divine moment in their monism that the philosophers could affirm the divine character of virtually everything in the onto/cosmological spectrum. Thus Plutarch (45–120 CE)¹⁴ is not to be regarded as a monotheist but as a theomonist, although Philo of Alexandria (20 BCE—c. 50 CE)¹⁵—Plutarch's peer in the same 'school' of thought—was definitely a monotheist. Nevertheless, this quasi-God of the philosophers is 'the good' and precisely as such transcendental and by extension absent. Regarded as such, the Sacred of the philosophers is juxtaposed or even contrasted to the world, which in turn is as the field of materiality is evil and immanent. Moreover, 'God' the-highest is thought of as being active and somehow present in the passive world-the-lowest. This required a whole range of apophatic theology to be developed on the one end—as in the cases of Numenius (2nd century CE)¹⁶ and Alcinoüs (2nd century CE)¹⁷ for example—and an entire series of descending/ascending intermediaries on the other end (à la Plutarch).

The onto/cosmological intermediaries of theomonism were based on the foundational Stoic idea of Logos, which allowed in turn the traditional ideas of divine revelation, prophecy, oracles, dreams and so forth to be re-introduced and substantiated afresh (Plutarch). Apart from a heightened interest in divine revelation during the period, the problem—basically a practical and thus an ethical/moral one—of bridging the gap between or, to put it otherwise, associating the most exquisite Divine moment and the most debased moment in the divinity of Existence was explored through ideas such as the soul of the world (Plutarch), an intermediary triad of gods along with a demiurge (Numenius), as well as the projection of divine intelligibles (Alcinoüs). The immediate result of all this at the level of philosophical discourse was the elaboration of a theory regarding analogy as the main substance of God-talk or, more generally, divine-talk. Furthermore, it is evident that the emphasis on Divine transcendentality was the dialectical counterbalance of a concomitant emphasis on evil immanence: evil ceases being a religious monopoly and

becomes a first-class philosophical category, sometimes disturbingly so within ontology but most frequently at the heart of ethics.

The pre-eminence of the problem of evil (O'Meara 2019) was accompanied by necessity, so to speak, by the problems of the freedom of will and the immortality of the soul. If evil is everywhere and pervades everything and everyone, how is one to re-conceptualize will in terms of freedom? What sense does freedom make at all? At the same time, though, the general understanding in which individuality had been seen as participating in the cosmic soul-substance turns into a radical individualization of the soul itself, posing thus a series of questions concerning the afterlife of the individual soul. Generally speaking, in all these cases one witnesses philosophical thought coming closer and actually fusing with popular religious belief into new spiritual formations. What is even more significant is the fact that questions such as evil, immortality and freedom are articulated in the period under discussion in ways that are intelligible only through the acceptance of widespread syncretism.

In particular, it is clear that the kind of problematics mentioned in this section did not reflect accurately the relevant teachings that could be traced within the tradition of philosophy; apart from this, it is also a problematics that would not have emerged as such in the first place by simply drawing on the possibilities within this very tradition. This means that the philosophical 'schools' of the Imperial Period were viewing their past through their present—a present overwhelmed by intense syncretistic dynamics. In other words, the multi-divine 'Philosophies of the Empire' had encountered certain potent mono-divine religions, and they were reacting, as well as responding, to them in ways they thought—and their competitors believed absolutely the same—were exactly what the great philosophers of the past had taught. This is how the question concerning the priority of truth came forward, but with a slight difference: although the philosophers were claiming the priority of truth for their forbearers on the basis of an alleged faithfulness, Christians (and Jews) were claiming the same for their revered figures on the basis of what they saw as the self-evident emulation of their teachings by the philosophers—both were looking at one and the same thing, but from a different angle.

4. Philo of Alexandria and Gnosis: Two Indispensable Links

The shift from the distinct doctrines of the 'Philosophies of the Empire' to the syncretic fuzziness of Greco-Roman theomorphism, as well as the interface between the latter and early Christian apologetic theorisation, are very hard to appreciate without the work and thought of Philo of Alexandria, a diasporic Jewish philosopher/theologian who at the turn of the millennium was destined to play a pivotal role in the mediation of the two world-experiences: the Greek and the Hebraic. It was this eclectic Plato-oriented thinker who in light of Yahweh's absence/presence within history infused philosophy with the antinomy of the absolute transcendence of the Divine, on the one hand, and the latter's most real and decisive activity at the level of immanence, on the other. Additionally, he was the first to translate the Platonic ideas into the thoughts of God, which the latter in turn is supposed to be employing in the creation of the universe; this creative aspect of God gets to fuse with the Platonic concept of the Demiurge, which in his capacity of the most exquisite mediation of God exhibits the traits of the Stoic Logos. Lastly, within the sacro-scape created by Hellenistic syncretism, Philo found it only natural to claim the priority of the prophet Moses over all philosophers: if affinities and equivalencies within the imperial sacro-scape were a given, and if the integrity of the revelation of Yahweh should not be jeopardized, then the antiquity of Moses could not but mean his priority over all other figures of global wisdom.

If Philo's thought stands out as the bright side, so to say, of the transition I am trying to delineate in the history of hierophanic ideas, it could be maintained that a quite widespread, yet hard to pinpoint down, phenomenon under the scholarly tag of 'Gnosis' constitutes the dark side of things.¹⁸ 'Gnosis' stands for a transformation of certain philosophical ideas, namely, the ontological inferiority of materiality, temporality as a manifestation of

cosmic decadence, and the insignificance of the particular, into new existential sensitivities regarding the world as the field of evil par excellence, human existence as an experience of fundamental fallenness, and the totally vulnerable state of the individual. It was precisely this dark side that necessitated the presence of a solution out of it—a solution that came in the guise of a religious savior. The emergence of ‘Gnosis’ took place most likely within a Hebrew context (Rudolph 1983), a fact that aligns it with Philo from just another perspective, but it is particularly noteworthy since it verifies that the synthesis between the pagan (the Other) and the monotheistic (the Same), which can be detected in the case of the early Christian ‘Apologists’, was in many respects prefigured and, by extension, already realized by thinkers in the broader tradition of Judaism—but with a small yet cardinal difference that needs to be accounted for, namely, their indifference towards conversion.

5. The Athenian ‘School’: The Justification of Innocence

Since the earliest part of the 2nd century CE the names of three ‘Apologists’ come up in the extant literature: Quadratus (2nd half of 1st century—120s CE), Aristides (2nd half of 1st century—c. 135 CE) and Athenagoras (c. 135–180s CE). The second and third of these figures are explicitly mentioned as philosophers, while their experience of conversion to Christianity played a major role both in their writings and their understanding of what it meant to *be* in the world as a Christian. What specifically enables one to speak of a certain apologist ‘school’ in Athens, that is, a certain theological outlook in Athenian Christianity, is the fact that on the one hand all the figures just mentioned seem to have been fond of arguing on the basis of solid evidence, and on the other hand they all had a practical orientation in judging debated issues. In particular, Quadratus—in what was most likely a kind of cross-religious comparison—argued that Christianity was a genuine and, by extension, superior religion based on the fact that some of the people who had been healed or were the recipients of a miraculous act on the part of Jesus were still alive during his own time and age. In other words, the genuineness and integrity of Christianity was presented as being based on real witnesses.¹⁹ Additionally, as we shall see, this emphasis on genuineness and integrity takes on a very practical/ethical/moral sense—and, presumably, the advantage that such a sense evoked—in the case of the other two Athenian ‘Apologists’.

Aristides, an Athenian by descent, wrote an *Apology* which is significant in quite some respects. Firstly, its theology presents a noteworthy apophatic character—the first of its kind in Christian literature—which makes perfect sense for a person with a background in philosophy. Secondly, however, Aristides is time and again very critical of the philosophers (of the pagan world)—one could even say aggressive in his competitive attitude—but nevertheless he takes recourse to a cosmological argument about the existence of God—itself a product of ancient philosophical reasoning. Thirdly, Christianity is deemed the only religion that is appropriate for humans, for it creates personalities of moral superiority and unmatched social behaviour. The true beliefs of the religion are only matched by its impeccable social profile.²⁰ Additionally, all this is the result of the Christians’ free and conscientious search for truth everywhere; a search that has led them to conversion and which they propose to others—even the Emperor himself—so they can see for themselves and convert to Christianity: ‘And that you may know, O King, that in saying these things I do not speak at my own instance, if you deign to look into the writings of the Christians, you will find that I state nothing beyond the truth’.²¹ Finally, it is just impossible for Christians to be the wicked people they are accused of being; in effect, their accusers are the ones who should be accused. Thus, not only Aristides exhorts his audience to convert in light of a very pronounced eschatological expectation,²² but he is also very skillful in turning the criminal stigmatization of Christians into a formidable criticism of the pagan social status quo.

Athenagoras, another Athenian by descent, as well as philosopher, had his own experience of conversion while he was attempting to refute the Christian scriptures.²³ His *Embassy for the Christians* is interesting basically for two reasons: (a) for being the first Christian text that presented systematically the objections of the pagan world against Christianity, and (b) for working out the implications of the practical/ethical reasoning of

the entire Athenian ‘school’. Regarding the first reason, Athenagoras resists as illogical and unjust the social and legal discrimination that Christians suffer, addresses the accusation of atheism as a total misunderstanding that requires only one to turn to the pagan writers themselves in order to witness many an argument against it, takes all accusations (about immorality, cannibalism, etc.) against the Christians to be the problem of paganism itself, and, finally, affirms the superiority of Christianity on all levels, theoretical and practical. Regarding the second of the above reasons, in light of the figure of Socrates, Athenagoras makes some quite pertinent claims as to the rationale of Christian thought in Athens, thoughts that not only confront the philosophical opponents of Christianity, but most importantly reflect a specific historical consciousness in the making.

More specifically, the ‘mentioning of Socrates makes sense only as an *indisputable example of the superiority and eventual prevalence of virtue*’ (Adrahtas 2002, p. 159; emphasis in the original) and Athenagoras evokes it because it facilitates the approach he is attempting in order to answer the problem of theodicy. ‘Athenagoras attempted to give his own Christian answer to an old and challenging question: how can it be that the virtuous suffers from the wicked? [...] Athenagoras’ answer seems to imply a certain conception of history’, according to which there are ‘two realities, good and evil [...] and both of them obey a single power, which [...] Athenagoras described as “some kind of divine law and sequence”, which precisely as ‘inviolable [...] means that whatever happened to Socrates exactly the same is to happen to the Christians’, that is, ‘the latter are to prevail at last [...] Athenagoras’ historical consciousness’ comprised thus ‘a series of divinely redeemed innocent victims’ and in ‘this historical frame it was inevitable to see the persecuted Christians as a peculiar continuation of innocent victims, and Socrates as their most typical forerunner’ (Adrahtas 2002, p. 160; emphasis in the original).

6. The ‘School’ of Justin: The Completion of Truth

The Athenian ‘school’ was, more or less, the one that set the stage for all future counter-argumentation against pagan accusations and, for that matter, philosophical objections to the truth Christianity was promoting. In this respect, all other figures, trends and ‘schools’ in early Christian apologetic theology have to be approached and appreciated for the distinctiveness and innovative elements they brought forward. Thus, I will focus on Justin the Philosopher and Martyr (c. 100–c. 165 CE),²⁴ and the ‘school’ of thought he inspired, by delving into what really makes this version of apologetic theology significant in its own right. More specifically, Justin has secured his place in the history of ideas as being the first Christian theologian to open up boldly to his pagan intellectual milieu and engage with its philosophical tradition through his theory of *spermatikos logos*,²⁵ i.e., the idea that all genuine spiritual insights before Christ the Logos were seed-like expressions of logos (reason) and about Logos. What this meant for Justin’s overall view of philosophy and/or philosophers from a Christian point of view—something shared and elaborated in a variety of ways by the figures and texts that make up what is called the ‘school’ of Justin—has been of paramount importance in the history of Christian theology—unfortunately, not always acknowledged for what it is.

Justin’s *First* and *Second Apology* are witness to a number of quite intriguing—one could even say sensational—aspects regarding their writer.²⁶ It is in these early Christian texts that we have for the first time such a straightforward appreciation of the value and importance of logical judgement, as well as multiple allusions to what the gist of philosophy is really all about. Moreover, what is of particular interest in this connection is that all this—and much more as I shall try to demonstrate—is associated with the figure of Socrates as a kind of paradigmatic philosopher. To be sure, this is so, not only because of the high esteem in which Socrates was held in the collective—both intellectual and popular—consciousness of the times, but also because of the prevalence of the Platonic tradition, through Middle Platonism, within philosophical circles. Another aspect of the *spermatikos logos* theory is that it perceives philosophy to be a hierophanic vocation, and thus on the one hand aligns it with religion and more specifically with Christianity, and on

the other hand creates the condition of possibility for competition and clash with all kinds of different hierophanic agents. Undoubtedly, this has to be recognized as an implication of the paradoxical dialectics that characterize even the most ingenious of ideas stemming from early Christianity.

Justin, in defending Christianity against its accusers, refrains from adopting a negative and defensive stance towards the representatives of pagan intelligentsia. Instead, he assumes a positive and constructive stance towards those intellectuals who became pathfinders by advocating for the reformation of their religious traditions and by advancing, at the same time, the search for the Divine within their respective cultures. It is as if Justin acknowledges that philosophy has played a role that is much more important and profound than anything the philosophers were ready to admit themselves, that is, that in a way philosophy—at least in its crowing moments—has embodied a certain presence of God within history. Furthermore, the theory of *spermatikos logos* understands, more or less explicitly, the history of ideas as a global (most likely) plant nursery, wherein diverse seeds have grown and come to fruition, preparing thus the world in a concrete and positive way—not just in a general and loose sense—to be in a position to understand the person and teaching of Jesus as what they were after all along, i.e., the completion of truth. Justin definitely espouses and claims for early Christianity a new historical consciousness, ‘a consciousness that placed side by side faith and reason, prophecy and philosophy, Jews and Greeks’, and as such his ‘theology emerged as an original elaboration of the Church’s universal consciousness’ (Adrahtas 2002, p. 159).

My remarks on the ‘school’ of Justin will conclude with a text from the 3rd century CE titled *Exhortation to the Greeks*, which apart from being a fine piece of literature is also a sophisticated reflection on the intellectual/philosophical heritage of the pagan world. The main reason it is regarded as being part of the ‘school’ of Justin—actually until the modern age it was believed to be a genuine work of his—is the fact that the text, although lacking the boldness of Justin’s *Apologies*, remains constructively engaged with its pagan milieu. The thrust of its counter-argumentation against the accusers of Christianity is that the philosophical establishment of the pagan world has already done themselves a great favour and a great service for the Christians, indeed: on the one hand, it has discredited itself and, on the other, it has saved itself from its own theoretical impasse. Once again by using Socrates as a typical example, the *Exhortation* stresses that it was ‘Socrates’ confession that he knew nothing that proved that the Greek world was self-discredited in its own knowledge’ (Adrahtas 2002, p. 162; emphasis in the original) and in this way put forward the view ‘that the true philosopher is not the one that through true reason partakes of Logos-Christ, but the one that is wise enough to acknowledge the limits of his own wisdom’ (Adrahtas 2002, p. 162; emphasis in the original). In other words, Christianity and its Divine Revelation should not be seen as opponents, but as the most beloved friends the pagan world could wish for; this was nothing but another way of putting forward the option of conversion.

7. The Syrian ‘School’: The Payback of Justice

In Syria early Christianity was developing a theological perspective quite different to what we have already seen in the case of Athens, the ‘school’ of Justin—which was more or less, a ‘school’ representing many a trend in the theology of both the East and the West—and also in the case of Alexandria, as we shall see in the following section. In particular, the Syrian apologetic ‘school’ developed a very competitive—basically, a confrontational, one should say—attitude towards paganism and its intellectual exponents. Two figures are the most typical examples of this ‘school’, namely, Tatian (120–180 CE) and Theophilus of Antioch (1st half of the 2nd century—c. 185 CE). Both of them bring us back to the 2nd century CE, but to a mentality and rhetoric quite dissimilar to what we have just seen in the *Exhortation*. Tatian, although a student of Justin in Rome, took up an aggressive, so to speak, stance regarding the onto/cosmo-logical matters addressed by the various philosophical ‘schools’ of the era—from his teacher it seems that he retained only the argumentative acumen, which he skillfully put into his own polemical purposes. His

‘Gnosis’-type inclinations and negativity towards materiality²⁷ will lead Tatian to reject all kinds of worldly matters in radical ways; the pagan beliefs and practices, both religious and philosophical, included. For Tatian, who converted in Rome after an intense period of reflection on the meaning of paganism, the only way to engage with one’s hierophanic past was to show that its totally irrelevant, obsolete and meaningless for the present and more so for the future. In other words, for Tatian the conversion of the individual entails in itself the conversion of one’s entire life-world; the more intense and radical the former, the more intense and radical the latter will be.

Theophilus of Antioch follows in the footsteps of Tatian, but he is quite more reserved in his rejection. His strategy of counter-argumentation relies basically upon ridicule and mockery, which he pursues efficiently thanks to his excellent writing skills. His treatises that make up the work *Ad Autolycum* are totally rejecting with regard to pagan thought of all types, since for Theophilus the truth of the Church is exclusive, i.e., it cannot be found before the Church, out of the Church or without the Church—either totally or partially. At the surface level his arguments follow many of the tropes of earlier ‘Apologists’, but what one starts realizing in his case is that early Christian apologetic literature, and especially its conversion discourse, was about an underlying ‘debate about history itself and the role of the Church within it’ (Adrahtas 2002, p. 161). Theophilus could not engage in any constructive dialogue with pagan philosophers, although here and there his work presents traits of eclecticism. However, the latter is a polemical strategy and not a dialectical predisposition, as it is for instance in the case of Justin. To be sure, there is a dialectics involved, but it is not really in relation to the world; it concerns the internal dynamics of his writing performance. The world and, for that matter, its pagan core, were simply too foolish to demand a genuine dialectical response . . .

8. The Alexandrian ‘School’: The Unity of Wisdom

The theological ‘school’ of Alexandria came to be the greatest in the ancient Church, transcending the limits of early Christianity and developing into one of the most vibrant and prolific centers of Christian thinking and learning until the expansion of Islam in the 7th century. As far as apologetic literature is concerned, the ‘school’ basically flourished in the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE through the writings of Clement of Alexandria (150–215 CE) and Origen (184–253 CE). There is a close theoretical association to be noted between the ‘school’ of Justin and the Alexandrian apologetic ‘school’, insofar as both affirm and underline the view that truth can be found throughout the pagan world. The Alexandrian ‘school’ was probably more explicit with regard to the broad field of reference that such a view could have, whereas the ‘school’ of Justin was surely more original in its overall evaluation. Nevertheless, the Alexandrian ‘school’ provided early Christianity with an immense amount of information and textual witnesses that could be regarded as acceptable or even commendable by Christians. The main difference, though, between the two ‘schools’ was a subtle yet decisive one. The ‘school’ of Justin espoused the preparation of the world so that it may be ready at some point, that is, with the Revelation of Jesus Christ, to accept that special moment of Divine Revelation as the completion of all previous ones. On the other hand, the Alexandrian ‘school’ would envisage a similar Divine Act of preparation, but not so much in view of its completion—the final aim was more about the world realizing that it is the Revelation of Jesus Christ that unites all wisdom, wherever it comes from.

What we see in the case of Clement and Origen is an open, informed and rigorous approach of pagan thought on the part of early Christian theology. This is so much so, that it is difficult to exclude the apologetic element from many of their seemingly non-apologetic writings—something that is especially true for Origen.²⁸ Clement feels extremely comfortable amongst his pagan past—religious, mythological, literary and philosophical—and his self-confidence instead of alienating him from the world, as in the case Tatian for instance, enables or even prompts him to deal with the world from a privileged standpoint. Furthermore, he does not seem to be primarily interested in converting anyone, but he is certainly adamant in confirming

the right choice of those who have already converted. Origen comes along as a top thinker at all levels and, for that matter, as one whom the intellectuals of the pagan world really took seriously as an opponent. In his work and thought, after about two centuries of Christian theoretical exploration and experimentation with the big onto/cosmo-logical issues of the pagan world and, most importantly, with their impact and implications on the experience of faith, the Christians had eventually their first elaborate, systematic and pathfinding answers. Divine transcendentality, mediation between God and the world, the ontological status of materiality, the problem of evil and the limits of human freedom, were all taken on by Origen in his thoroughly apophatic theology, his cosmic Christology, his philosophically elaborate anthropology and overall understanding of history in light of future *apokatastasis*.²⁹ With Origen the apologetic conversion discourse of the early Church was not aiming anymore at convincing people to either become Christians or to consolidate their choosing of Christian faith, but it was opening up new avenues in the history of ideas—even by functioning as a catalyst for the transformation of pagan thought through the emergence of its last great intellectual moment, namely, Neoplatonism.

9. Rome and the North African ‘School’: The Rectification of Corruption

In the Northwestern part of Africa, as well as in Rome itself, there are affinities in apologetic literature that allow one to speak of a proper ‘school’. Tertullian (150–220 CE), Hippolytus of Rome (170–235 CE), Marcus Minucius Felix (late 2nd–mid 3rd century CE), Cyprian of Carthage (210–258 CE), Lactantius (240–320 CE) and Arnobius (255–330 CE) were the figures that formed its contours by combining elements from other ‘schools’—but most notably not from the Alexandrian ‘school’—and stressed in a peculiar way the practical life dimensions involved in the attack of the pagan world against Christianity. In general, this ‘school’ was more or less aggressive, engaged with pagan objections from the inside, that is, by criticizing the pagans in light of their own self-image, and generally was fond of a less theoretical discourse compared to what was generally the case in the East—although all of them were quite well-versed in the Greek apologetic literature. To some extent Hippolytus stands as an exception to the above, but along with all the aforementioned figures he represented a very austere, radical and exclusive attitude towards the world of pagan values and ideas. Tertullian’s *Apologeticus*³⁰ most likely gave the general tone to the ‘school’, whereas *Octavius*³¹ by Marcus Minucius Felix was intended for the pagans, confirming thus the programmatic conversion objectives of its author.

Tertullian does give the tone to this entire ‘school’ by basically focusing on two aspects of pagan criticism: firstly, the fact that the pagans instead of embodying the quintessence of their traditions—legal and, more generally, cultural—have been corrupted and represent the worst betrayal of their own legacy; secondly, one need not look far away for some kind of complex theory concerning arguments in favour of Christianity, given that it is human nature itself that is the best advocate of the integrity of faith.³² More specifically, Tertullian’s *Apologeticus* was composed right after Tertullian’s conversion (c. 197 CE), and in this respect constitutes a prime example of conversion discourse insofar as it reflects the experience of someone who has converted. Indirectly but clearly, it is also a convert’s account for—and, by extension, rationalization of—their choice and decision to become Christian. In a manner very characteristic of his whole attitude, Tertullian depicts conversion as a more or less sudden, pivotal, transformative and radical change.³³

Apologeticus enables one to identify a number of conversion discourse strategies. Betraying a sense of superiority, the text moves from ridicule to criticism and back. Roman law is mocked due to the improper way it is applied to Christians, while at the same time culture-shame is used in order to generate a conversion process. Tertullian maintains that the unjust treatment of Christians is due to ignorance,³⁴ and so he indirectly calls upon the pagans to be informed. In other words, information becomes the first step towards conversion. Counter-stigmatization as a reaction to the rumours and lies concerning the stigmatization of Christians as people committing murder and incest instills an affirmation of self-identity; or, to put it differently, the pagans are actually the ones committing the

crimes. Here, we see again the use of culture-shame, but this time it is potentially more effective, for through aversion it could turn people away from their beliefs and practices. Moreover, the usual Christian criticism against paganism—untrue gods, wicked and malicious—comes forward quite aggressively by claiming that impiety should not be identified with Christianity but with philosophy, since the latter is self-discredited and so has no credentials and thus does not deserve to lead intellectually. Last, but not least, comes edification with regard to the internal profile of Tertullian's audience: the faithful engage with the world, and they represent something more than a philosophy—a new way of action! Even, Tertullian admits, if Christianity were to be seen as a philosophy—which means that some or the majority did see it that way—then it should be treated in a fair and square manner, like all of philosophical 'schools'. If anything, this is definitely a comment that betrays that Christianity was working within one and the same 'marketplace of ideas'.

10. Conclusions

The present study could only go through the rich apologetic literature of early Christianity by focusing on some of its most important exponents. Additionally, this in turn was conducted from a very specific perspective, namely, the identification of the conversion discourse strategies this literature used in its competitive relationship with the overarching philosophical atmosphere. My final objective has been to emphasize the involvement of early Christianity in the intellectual hegemony of the Imperial Period. More specifically, through the use of a typology of apologetic 'schools', I have attempted to demonstrate the following for each one of them. The Athenian 'school' was driven by a consciousness of superiority in light of innocence, which could be translated as an alternative means to achieve individual empowerment, given the overwhelming sociopolitical powers operative in the Roman Empire. The 'school' of Justin put forward, on the one hand, a vision of universality, which in itself must have been received as a provocative call to join in the Christian movement and convert, and on the other hand showed that the power of philosophy was in effect nothing more than the expression of a desperate need and fundamental existential lack. In the case of the Syrian 'school' one witnesses the converted becoming the worst enemy of what previously was their cherished life-world; a most telling proof that the past was over and done with! At the same time, the self-confidence of the Christian Same could turn into outright disdain for the pagan Other. The Alexandrian 'school' could not see any valid reason for Christians to be defensive in the world, although it certainly understood the need for them to adopt a corrective attitude. Most importantly, though, this was the 'school' that was driven by a wisdom consciousness that was in a position to open up paths for everyone. Lastly, for the 'Apologists' in the Roman and African traditions, conversion was conceived and promoted as the sole decent choice one was left with if they were to save their own human integrity.

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Notes

- ¹ Inter-religious co-existence and exchange are, in general, phenomena which have been present throughout history, whereas their specific societal or cultural profile depends on the extent, tension and character of the agents involved. The religious histories of the Subcontinent and China are cases of special interest in their own right. On the other hand, late modernity/postmodernity exhibits these very phenomena in a manner similar to that of the period I am dealing with in the present article—only
- ² The problem of the periodization of Early Christianity is still a debated issue. For the purposes of the present article I take 'Early Christianity' to refer roughly to the first three centuries CE. In this respect, it should not be confused with the 'Jesus movement',

‘Primitive Christianity’ (1st century CE), and the ‘Ancient Church’ (the period up to the 5th—or, according to some, even up to the 7th—century CE).

For the term ‘hierophany’ and its derivatives, I draw on (Eliade 1965).

For the category of ‘champs religieux’ see (Bourdieu 1971).

For this category see (Tweed 2006).

To be sure, the competition for intellectual hegemony between Early Christianity and the philosophical ‘schools’ of the Imperial Period was not limited to the ‘Apologists’. On the contrary, it also extended well into the much more systematic literature of Christians, as one can see in the case of Origen, but perhaps most interestingly in the case of the so-called ‘Gnostic’ literature, which one way or another was in an interactive relationship with ancient philosophy. See (Corrigan and Rasimus 2013).

For a comprehensive presentation of this aspect see (Albertson 2014, pp. 40–59).

For a detailed discussion of the struggle that this involved see (Athanasiasiadi 2006).

See a relevant and extensive discussion in (Adrahtas 2007).

For an introduction to conversion discourse see (Bruce 2018, pp. 153–73).

As mentioned above, the thought of the so-called ‘Gnostic’ circles—either loosely associated with some idea of ‘Gnosis’ or ideologically and institutionally organized as Gnosticism—represents a very important eclectic-cum-philosophical version of Christianity that should be considered in studies regarding conversion discourse during the times of Early Christianity. However, this is not the focus of the present study and, more to the point, this version of Christianity requires a particularly constructed methodology in order to deconstruct the imaginative and mythopoeic universe of its authors. For the diversity of this thought, see (Turner 2019; Dubois 2019; Thomassen 2019).

As we see in the case of the interaction between Neoplatonism and Origen. See (Remes 2008).

The term, albeit with a different meaning, goes back to (Ballard 1906).

For an introduction to Plutarch see (Lamberton 2001).

For an introduction to Philo of Alexandria see (Hadas-Lebel 2003).

For an approach to the theology of Numenius see (Puech 1934, pp. 745–78).

For an introduction to the apophatic thought of Alcinous see (Whittaker 1978).

One should always keep in mind the difference between the general phenomenon of ‘Gnosis’, which pre-dates Christianity, and the specific systems of thought that make up Gnosticism from the late 1st century CE onwards. See (Bianchi 1967).

See *Historia Ecclesiastica* IV: 3 (Eusebius 1926).

Kay (1897, p. 277).

Kay (1897, p. 278).

Kay (1897, p. 279).

See for example (Rankin 2009, pp. 5–6).

For an introduction to Justin, his milieu and times, see (Parvis and Foster 2007).

This theory was evidently an adaptation of the relevant idea of Stoic physics (Sambursky 1987).

See Papadopoulos (1994, p. 233).

For these aspects of his thought see (Lössl 2020).

It is easy to identify *Contra Celsum* as an apologetic piece of literature, but in most of Origen’s other works the apologetic element is simply everywhere.

See for example (Rabinowitz 1989).

For an introduction to Tertullian’s *Apologeticus* see (Kerasztes 1966).

For an introduction to this apologetic writing see (Clarke 1967).

See his famous phrase ‘testimonium animae naturaliter christianae’ (*Apologeticus* 17: 6).

See for example *Apologeticus* 18.

See especially the beginning of *Apologeticus*, where ignorance is insightfully associated with fear.

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