

Irenaeus and the Emerging Church

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Emerging Church theology compared to Irenaeus “lost Christianity”.

In my paper with the title; “the dream of a perfect church - Emerging Church”, I compare Emerging Church¹ theology with the theology of Irenaeus and, the Christianity which has its roots in Asia Minor and Antioch.

The most significant exponent of the theology of the northeastern Mediterranean was Irenaeus.²Antioch is where Christianity first comes after Jerusalem. In other words it is the oldest Christianity we can trace back to the present day. I shall call this theology for Type C theology as explained below.

A part of my conclusion is that the church again is reminded about this “lost Christianity,” through Methodist writers like Geoffrey Wainwright, Justo González and Runyon. Other writers like Robert Farrar Capon, N.T Wright and Dallas Willard, and as I point out in my paper, many of the Emerging Church Leaders and personalities like; Brian McLaren, Tony Jones, Doug Pagitt and Rob Bell.

3 Types of Theology

I use as a basis for this comparison 3 cities and 3 theologians summed into three types. These three types have according to Justo González influenced Christian theology to be what it is today. You will find all 3 presented in my paper, but for this article I will only present the third type; Irenaeus and Antioch.

Tertullian – Cartage – Type A theology

Origen – Alexandria – Type B theology

Irenaeus – Antioch – Type C theology

Towards the end of the second century and the beginning of the third, there were in the Christian church three major theological perspectives generally considered orthodox. These I shall call A, B, and C, following the order of our contemporary familiarity with them, not the chronological order of their

¹ The definition of Emerging Church theology in this article is; a combination of Emergent Village and People like Rob Bell who would not call himself any of the above.

² Irenaeus spent most of his life in Lyon. We do not know why Irenaeus had moved to Lyon, hundreds of miles away from his native Smyrna, He was part of a community of believers there, and many of whom also seem to have migrated from Asia Minor. The tradition Irenaeus carried with him to Gaul reflected what was current in Asia Minor. His theological ancestors, besides Polycarp (who was said to be a disciple of John the disciple of Jesus), are the book of Revelation, which includes a letter addressed to the church in Smyrna; the fourth Gospel, from which he draws constantly; and other such kindred minds as Ignatius of Antioch, Theophilus, and to a degree Justin Martyr.

appearances. While types A and B are best known to twentieth-century Western Christians, Type C is much older.

The difference between these three types of theology does not lie specifically in any one point of doctrine, but rather in their entire perspectives, which then are reflected in their understanding of every theological theme, from creation to the final consummation.³

A lost Christianity

I show in my paper how the theology that Irenaeus presented got lost, and how Christianity with its roots in Alexandria and Carthage are the dominant ones to this very day. The fact that Type A and B are so dominant has according to González brought about a crisis in theology.

These developments are also bringing about a crisis in theology. What ... I call "type A" theologies, as well as those of "type B," are unable to cope with the crisis. The former are too rigid, too tied to the past, too unwilling to see the new things God is doing. The latter are too rationalistic, too optimistic about the future, too oblivious to the power of evil. Both are too static, too A historical, to deal with the new world of the twenty-first century. In the midst of that crisis, the often forgotten third type of theology... has much to offer.⁴

I will give a short summary of Type A and B theology which are the theologies which are predominant today. I understand that by giving a summary I in no way do Tertullian or Origen justice.

Type A theology which finds its base in Carthage and the lawyer Tertullian presents a God as a lawgiver and Judge. Sin is breaking the law and as humans we have a human debt that can receive forgiveness through a new law given by Christ

Type B theology finds its base in Alexandria where Origen with the influence of platonic thought, see God as transcendent and the ineffable one. Christ is seen as a teacher and an Example.

What does Irenaeus Type C theology look like? And what are the similarities to the Emerging Church?

First of all it is clear that Gonzalez puts this theology into a world that he describes similarly to how Emerging Church would describe the world.

³ González, Justo L., *Christian thought revisited three types of theology* 1999 s.x

⁴ *Ibid.* s.x

Likewise, during these last ten years talk of "post-Modernity" has become ever more common. It is clear that the great "meta-narrative" of modernity is in crisis. But it is also significant that, because their meta narrative no longer functions, the groups that wielded power in modernity have now decreed that all meta narratives must go- which in practice means that power and control will remain where they now are.⁵

Irenaeus view of the bible

The Emerging Church like its earlier counterpart type C theology does not see Christianity primarily as a way to get to heaven. Rather, it is a clue that gives us a glimpse into Gods purposes for human history and invites us to participate in those purposes.⁶

Through history and In the field of theology it is abundantly clear that what we once took for normative, universal theology was to great extent the particular theology of North Atlantic white males who, because they were dominant, could convince themselves, and convince others, that their views were indeed universal.

Emerging Church is making this clear and so is Gonzalez. Irenaeus would say as the emerging Church does today: That to become a Christian involves learning the story of Israel and of Jesus well enough to interpret and experience oneself and ones world in its terms.⁷

Irenaeus approaches Scripture in a way radically different from either Tertullian or Origen. His fundamental vision is that of a Sheppard God, leading his people through history.⁸

This sort of scriptural interpretation is usually called typological, because in the events of which the Bible speaks, one is to see "types" or "figures" of later events- especially of Jesus Christ, us also of the church and the final consummation.⁹

What Irenaeus proposes is not a system of philosophical doctrines, a la Origen, nor a series of moral rules and principles, a la Tertullian, but an entire vision of the world and history in the light of biblical revelation.¹⁰

To interpret history and the bible Typological is exactly what Irenaeus started some 2000 years ago. The Emerging church (and I would argue a big part of other church traditions) approach scripture often in the

⁵ Ibid. s.ix

⁶ Ibid. s.132

⁷ Ibid. s. 144

⁸ Ibid. s.54

⁹ Ibid. s.56

¹⁰ Ibid. s.58

same way. This is clearly different from Tertullian who would approach scripture as a book of law. With guidelines and laws which can be obeyed and followed or broken.

Gonzalez points out that Typological interpretation collapsed under the combined onslaughts of rationalistic, pietistic, and historical- critical developments. Scripture ceased to function as the lens through which theologians viewed the world and instead became primarily an object of study whose religiously significant or literal meaning was located outside itself. . . .it does not suggest as is often said in our day, that believers find their stories in the Bible, but rather that they make the story of the Bible their story.¹¹

If, on the other hand, one approaches theology from the paradigm of history, as Type C does, then it is quite conceivable for various people, with different experiences and perspectives, still to claim the same history.¹²

Irenaeus view of God

According to Irenaeus, this is what sets Christians apart from Gentiles, for whom God is "Maker, creator, and almighty", and from Jews, for whom God is "Lord and Legislator." This does not mean that the Christian God does not have such Characteristics, but rather that the gospel teaches that the God the philosophers worshiped only as the omnipotent creator, and the Jews only as sovereign lawgiver, is also and above Father.¹³

God is the God of history. He is not transcendent. He is perfect in his creation. It's not important that he has created it, but that he will take care of it. It's not important that he is the great engineer, but that he is the father. It's not important what God can. It's not important that he is wise as in Alexandria, but as humans we can be thankful that he takes care of creation. Terms such as father and shepherd's are words to use as opposed to Carthage and Alexandria where God is more viewed as a Judge, lawgiver and transcendent.

Ireneus could say the following: Children do not first and foremost think of a dad or mum as lawgiver and judge. Children are interested in ensuring that dad is a dad, that mum is mum. Irenaeus understanding is that we are in a family relationship. We are in a close relationship with God that exists around us and in us.

¹¹ Ibid. s. 144

¹² Ibid. s.145

¹³ González, Justo L., *Christian thought revisited three types of theology* 1999 s.27

Irenaeus view on creation

For him, the original creation was not the end, but the beginning of Gods relations with human creatures. Since history is the fundamental category of Irenaeus thought, he sees in creation the very beginning of history; which is not the result of sin.¹⁴

He speaks about that God has created the world. But God has not made the world more fully. It is something that began immediately and at the same time, it is something that continues. It has begun and it will continue. One can say that it's perfect, but at the same time as it continues. The creation as an organic matter.

Lets use a small child as an example to make this clear. We will all agree that a small newborn baby is a perfect creature, but at the same time a baby cannot walk, cannot talk and has not the same mental ability as that of a grown human being. A baby is finished and perfect but at the same time, not finished and perfect. No one would argue that a baby is imperfect simply because it cannot speak. But if you find a 15-year old that cannot speak then something is not as it should be. Irenaeus sees creation as an ever ongoing process, something that never will finish. It is something that is in the works.

Irenaeus view on the human predicament

Irenaeus seems to believe that the more he exalts the value of human beings, the more their Creator will be exalted. Part of the great difference between the life of sin and the new creation is that the former is life in subjection, which does not allow us to develop fully, whereas the latter is a life of constant growth, in which our potential is increasingly brought to fruition.¹⁵

Irenaeus view on Sin

Sin is understood differently than from the viewpoints of the other two types of theology. Sin does not consist in reaching a somewhat arbitrary law imposed by the Creator (Carthage), nor ceasing to contemplate the divine (Alexandria). Since God is above all a shepherd and a parent, the purpose of divine laws is to guide us in our own development.¹⁶

¹⁴ Ibid. s.29

¹⁵ Ibid s.45

¹⁶ Ibid. s.30

So sin is disobedience. The idea of children who are disobedient in relation to their parents. It is possible to distinguish this in relation to the judicial system one finds with Tertullian. Man uses punishment to get a better result. For that we should grow, not because you deserve a punishment. God is a father who can forgive unlimited. Sin is disobedience but also damage to the creation. González explains it this way:

A Sheppard does not lead the flock along a certain path for the sole purpose of showing power and authority. A human parent does not establish rules of conduct for the sheer pleasure of being obeyed, but from the conviction that those rules will benefit the children. Likewise, the laws established by God serve the human creature in its own process of growth and development towards closer communion with God.

Sin makes that one violation of the community with God and hinders growth.

If one has a disease, one cannot be forgiven. If one has uncleanness, one cannot be forgiven. In both instances forgiveness (as we often define it) is not the solution. It is rather about getting in the right position, so that growth can take place again.

For Irenaeus all humanity are saved In Christ. Adam and Christ are parallel gestalts.

Original sin, then, does not consist merely in an inheritance from our ancestors, as Tertullian and in general, Type A theology would say, nor is it a way of speaking of our individual actions, as with Type A theology, but it is rather the consequence of human solidarity when it is turned to evil. Literally then, "in Adam we all have sinned."

In Adam all have sinned, sin is one of mankind's conditions one is born with, and into. It's something we are infected of in the same way as a disease.

González believes that because of our individual way of thinking, this is perhaps the most difficult of Irenaeus theology for us to understand.

We are used to thinking in individualistic terms. Irenaeus on the other hand believed that all humankind were like a single body, whose head was Adam.

Irenaeus view on Christ

Christ is human. The incarnation thought is very important for Irenaeus. It is not important that he is born of a Virgin. It had not done much if he were a roman soldier. He is human for better or worse. All people are created in God's image. Therefore, all convey that Jesus is the God depicted.

He is first and foremost a victor. He gives the regulations, or sets the basis that growth can take place

both within himself, but also humanity and creation as a whole. He is growth, he is life, he is this dynamic life that all can take part of.

Adam and Eve are created with Christ as a model. A big part of Christ's purpose in the world according to Irenaeus is that he lives a normal life. He goes into death not because it was necessary, but because it is part of a normal human life. In going into death he's going to lure death. What happens is that death explodes from within. Life that once was filled with emptiness is now life. Emptiness is now fullness. In this way Jesus puts an end to the devil and evil. He appears as the great victor and lord. The consequence of this is that people now can live their lives in both death and life. Humanity can dare to meet death to experience life with and in Christ.

Irenaeus and the Final Consummation

Irenaeus vision of the final consummation is not simply a return to the original state, as in Alexandrine Type B, nor even the establishment of a static order, as in the more legalistic type A, but the vision of a new reality and a new order, a "kingdom without end," A kingdom in which all shall be coheirs of the Sovereign and continue to exist and grow in freedom, justice, and communion with God.¹⁷

In my paper I have shown how the theologies of Rob Bell, Brian McLaren and others use a lot of the same thought patterns, I have found Irenaeus and the Type C theology use. I have not documented the similarities direct in this article. But if you are familiar with any of the above mentioned authors, you will find an interesting familiarity in Irenaeus. You will find that in many ways that Irenaeus as a type for much of the Christianity found in the early development of theology has once again been brought to the forefront of Christian thinking and debate. Like me you will find it is not something new, but it has been around a couple thousand years.

For a more detailed comparison of Emerging Church and Irenaeus, you can read my paper originally called: "Drømmen om den perfekte kirke – Emerging Church". It is in Norwegian and you may download it at www.danielkorol.com

¹⁷ González, Justo L., *Christian thought revisited three types of theology* 1999 s.46