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Conflict in the Churches between the God of the Bible and the God of the Philosophers

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Summary:

Hugh Nibley has gathered a collection of statements from Church Fathers and modern scholars that acknowledge that views concerning God changed. The early church was based on the Hebrew Bible but churchmen were later influenced by the arguments of different philosophers.

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Conflict in the Churches Between the God of the Bible and the God of the Philosophers

by Hugh W. Nibley

I. The Jewish Doctors: From Philo to Plotinus the Jewish teachers steadily deeschatologized and de-literalized the scriptures. (N. Dentwich, JQR IV, 1-21).

"...the initiative in the attempt to stamp out orthodox Judaism and to Hellenize the Jews was not taken by Antiochus, but by the influential body of Hellenistic Jews." (Oesterley, Apoc., 29).

The Rabbis were implacably hostile to the old Jewish sects (G. Molin, *Sohne Gottes*, p. 166) Including the "Galilean heretics," (Eisler I, 484). They banned and destroyed the old Apocryphal writings (K. Kohler, JQR XI, 145), which were then taken up by the Christians (Torrey, *Apoc. Lit.*, 13ff).

The school of Hillel established a "method of overcoming the letter through the disintegration of the text into its components, the single words, with complete disregard of the context for the sake of the particular word..." (I. Sonne, *Ginzberg Jubilee*, 278).

The scholars "spun out abstract doctrines far beyond the ken of the common folk, and insisted that these are the truths of religion and morality." (M. Kadushin, *Rab. Mind*, 87f). The Meturgemen in rendering the Bible into the language of the common people "did not scruple to transform the text before him in the boldest fashion...to modify the language of the prophet...and even, in certain cases, to reverse the plain meaning of the text." (Stenning *Targ. Is.*, x, xi, xiv.).

In this operation the most useful tool was the Memra (= "Ma'amar" or "Dibbur;" "Logos"): "The Word," in the sense of the creative or directing word or speech of God manifesting His power in the world of matter or mind; a term used especially in the Targum as a substitute for 'the Lord' when an anthropomorphic expression is to be avoided...In the Targum the Memra figures constantly as the manifestation of divine power or as God's messenger in place of God Himself, whenever the predicate is not in conformity with the dignity or the spirituality of the Deity." eg., Ex. 33:22 "I will cover thee with My Memra," NOT "My hand". Gen. 3:8, Dt. 4:33, "The voice of the Memra," NOT "the voice of God," etc. (*Jew. Encyclop.*, 8:46f).

Today it is recognized that there are in the Old Testament "many dominating anthropomorphisms which seek to bring forth Yahweh's relationship to his people." (J. Muilenburg, *JBL* 77:23). Contrary to popular belief, the question of idolatry "could have played no part in the formation of Israel's monotheism," (Y. Kaufman, *JBL* 1951, 195), and there is in the Old Testament "No argument against plurality of gods." (id. 189).

II. The Christian Conflict.

A. *The Early Christians were Literalists*

"But that the older unspeculative conception of the creation of man in the image of God survived in the theology of the Church is shown by unambiguous passages in the Clementine Homilies." (S. McCasland, JBL, 1950, 95).

eg., Clem. Homil. X, 3: Peter addresses a conference: "Man, who was made in the image and in the likeness of that God who creates heaven and earth and all things on the earth, even those that are obviously stronger than he, such as the lion, the elephant, etc."

In the common Christian belief of the Second century, "the Holy Ghost appears as a distinct entity (alles eine besondere Grosse) beside the Almighty Father and Jesus Christ." (C. Schmidt, Texte und Unters., 43: 273).

When Clement of Alexandria speaks not for himself but for the Primitive Church, he says "that God and the celestial spirit world are to be thought of as literal and physical (Körperlich), which is completely un-Clementine." (Bousset, Jud. Schulbetrieb, 157).

Tertullian, the first and best-informed of the Latin Fathers, "in his hostility to idealism (Platonic), falls into the error of accepting a crass materialism which translated God Himself into terms of body." (C. Cochrane, Christianity and Cl. Culture, 230).

Ignatius (1-2 Cent.): "There are some Christ-betrayers, bearing about the name of Christ in deceit, and corrupting the word of the Gospel... They do not believe in His resurrection. They introduce God as a being unknown..." (Trall. 6).

"Do ye, therefore, mark those who preach other doctrines, how they affirm that the Father of Christ cannot be known..." (Smyrn. 6).

The worst error of the Gnostics - so-called - is that "they teach that Almighty is unknowable...that he is unutterable, indescribable, unnameable..." (Const. Ap. VI, 10) "He is not self-caused and self-begotten, as the Gnostics say, but everlasting and without beginning." (Ib. 11).

B. *The Doctors deliberately renounced the teachings of the Early Church Regarding God:*

"I know that people say that according to the scriptures God is physical (corpus esse)...But 'God is light' (John 1:5), and since God is light he is therefore completely incorporeal." (Origen, Peri Arch. I, i).

"The vulgar speak of God as of a person, but they are wrong...The (Pagan) philosophers, on the other hand, held very nearly the same opinion of God as we do. Plato's opinion especially is virtually identical with our own...so that any one might conclude either that all present-day Christians are philosophers, or that all the ancient philosophers were Christians." (Min. Felix, Oct 18f. 210 A.D.).

"There are some who say that man is in God's image, and quote Gen. 1:26 without first knowing what is meant by the image and similitude of God." (Philastrus, PL 12:1269).

“At this time the issue was stirred up as to whether God has a body like a man’s; the greater part of the common people especially insisted that God has a physical body of human form. Bishop Theophilus of Alexandria led the movement against this belief, and was opposed by the ascetes of the desert...who anathemized the books of Origen”...Most of these Egyptian reformers were “naive souls, simple and plain of speech, the greater part of them being uneducated, while the Bishops were university men and followers of Origen.” It was the “Origenists vs. the Anthropomorphists.” (Socrat. CB, VI, 7; Mich. Syr. VIII, 1; Theodoret, CH, PG 82: 1141; Soxom. CH VIII, 11.).

The greatest reformer of the 4th century was Audios the Syrian, who tried to restore the primitive purity of the Church. “He preached anthropomorphism, and the doctrine easily fooled-naïve and uneducated people.” (Soz. CB VIII, 11).

“If stories about the gods are to be understood mythically, then they are nothing but words...if they are to be understood allegorically, then they are nothing on earth but myths.” (Aritides, Apol. 13:7, the first Christian Apologist, rejecting all allegorical interpretation).

The word that best describes God, “asomaton, that is to say, incorporeal is not employed in our Scriptures, where it is entirely unknown,” (Origen, P. Archon, Intd. 8). Therefore it is necessary for Origen to squeeze it out by forced and arbitrary reading. For example the scripture, “Who hath seen me hath seen the Father,” would give us a bad time, were not the passage more correctly understood by us to mean NOT “see” but “understand”. “The story of Moses seeing his hinder parts is just one of those old wives tales. Let no one think it impious if we say that God is not even visible to the Savior. For to see and be seen are the properties of bodies, and so cannot be applied to the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.” (Ib. II, iv, 3).

“In the third century...Bishop Nepos attacked the ‘allegorists’ with a book in defense of a literal and earthly Millennium; in reply to this ‘unhealthy’ teaching. Dionysius, the sophisticated Bishop of Alexandria wrote what Jerome calls ‘an elegant book, deriding the old fable about the thousand years and the earthly Jerusalem with its gold and jewels, the restoration of the Temple’, etc. This in turn brought forth a two-volume counterblast in Jerome’s day by one Apollinarius, who “not only speaks for his own following but for the greater part of the people here as well, so that I can already see,” says Jerome, ‘what a storm of opposition is in store for me!’ Jerome frankly admits that the opposition represents the old Christian tradition, his own liberal ‘spiritualizing’ interpretation running counter to the beliefs of such eminent earlier authorities as Tertullian, Victorinus, Lactantius, and Irenaeus. This puts him in a dilemma: ‘If we accept these things literally we are judaizers, if spiritually, as they were written, we seem to be contradicting the opinions of many of the ancients.’” (H.N., JQR 50, 99.).

C. *The philosophic vocabulary had no place in early Christianity:*

The word “asomaton, that is incorporeal, is not employed in our Scriptures where it is entirely unknown.” (Origen, P. Ar. Intd. 8).

The term “non-being”, “out of nothing”, “Consubstantial”, etc. are not found in the Scriptures and were unknown to the early Church. Therefore their introduction caused much misgiving and discussion. (Soc. EH I, viii, 27).

“The word ‘ousia’ (nature, being) was unknown to the common people, since it is not contained in the scriptures.” (Socrat. HE II, 37).

"The doctrine that caused the greatest amusement to the heathen, and which they have the hardest time understanding is that concerning Christ's physical incarnation and suffering." (const. Ap. III, 5).

Peter: "We deny absolutely that there is any evil in matter as such," (Clem. Recog. IV, 25).

Peter to Simon Magus: "You seem to me not to know what a father and a God is; but I could tell you both whence the spirits are, and when and how they were made. But it is not permitted to me now to disclose these things to you, who are in such error in respect of the knowledge of God. If we set forth pure truth...with arguments and sophisms, they (the hearers) roll them in the mud (it scandalizes them)...Wherefore I also, for the most part,...try to avoid publishing the chief knowledge concerning Supreme Divinity to unworthy ears." (Clem. Recog. 2:60, 3:1). Simon had just said: "I say that there are many gods, but that there is one God incomprehensible and unknown to all." (Ib. II, 37).

Martin Luther complained "that it was impossible to become a theologian except with the help of Aristotle, 'that comedian who deluded the church with his Greek mask.'" (C. Michalson, Un. Sem. Qt. Rev. 13:3).

D. *Why the God of the Philosophers and the Christian Doctors is the Same:*

"With perfect impunity and the greatest of ease they proceeded to do violence to the Scriptures, blithely disregarding the original teaching...They never consulted the Scriptures, but busily worked out elaborate structures of syllogisms...They cultivated the arts of the unbelievers and took to hair-splitting discussions about the once simple faith of the Holy Writ." (Euseb. CH, V, 28).

"O miserable Aristotle. Who taught them dialectic, the art of proving and disproving..." (Tertull., De praescr. 7).

E. *The theory of the later Doctors:*

"A really scientific theology which would present the Christian God as abstract being in the manner common to orthodox metaphysics was a crying need if the (Christian) religion was to have standing...The pronouncements at Nicaea and Chalcedon show the finished product." (Enslin, WTR 47, 215).

"In expounding the Bible if one were always to confine oneself to the unadorned grammatical meaning...it would be necessary to assign to God feet, hands, and eyes, as well as corporeal and human affections...These propositions uttered by the Holy Ghost were set down in that manner by the sacred scribes in order to accommodate them to the capacities of the common people, who are rude and unlearned...Now the Bible, merely to condescend to popular capacity, has not hesitated to obscure some very important pronouncements, attributing to God Himself some qualities extremely remote from (and even contrary to) His essence...Having arrived at any certainties in physics, we ought to utilize these as the most appropriate aids in the true exposition of the Bible." (Galileo, To Christina, S. Drake, 181-3).

"We must also take heed, in handling the doctrine of Moses, that we altogether avoid saying positively and confidently anything which contradicts manifest experiences and reasoning of philosophy or the other sciences. For since every truth is in agreement with all other truth, the truth of the Holy Writ cannot be contrary to the solid reasons and experiences of human knowledge." (Id., 186).

(According to these classical statements, God in order to help the feeble understanding of men to grasp his nature, deliberately obscures the issue by giving us a picture of himself that is as much unlike him as possible! The "unadorned meaning" of the Word of God is hopelessly misleading until it has been corrected and brought into line with the "manifest experiences and reasoning of philosophy or the other sciences")

III. The Result:

"Deicide has been committed. Existentialism is not the murderer. It is simply the witness to the crime. As Nietzsche said, "is it the churches which are the tombs of God, and God is dead not because He never existed, but because people have killed Him with belief. The very manner of the church's credence is the murder weapon." Existentialism detects the crime when it says: "No God could be believed as you believe Him and survive..." (C. Michalson, Un. Sem. Qt. Rev. 13:4) "God is set aside, according to Bultmann, not by denying Him but by affirming Him in the wrong way. Ironically, the theologians are the class of people most likely to commit deicide." (Ib., 5).

"According to Aristotle," as Ortega y Gasset has said, "God does nothing but think about thought -- which is to convert God into an intellectual, or, more precisely, into a modest professor of philosophy. To speak of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in terms so bloodless is deicide and Luther witnessed the crime." (Ib., 4).

"I am unconvinced that the word 'God' symbolizes anything. Not only are many statements about God self-contradictory, but they may not refer to anything but aspirations... as far as I can make out...you want me to take the statement that Jesus ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of God, as a metaphor...how careful one must be not to push the thing a little further, and regard the paternity of God and the virginity of Mary as metaphors, like God's arm." (J.B.S. Haldane, Sci. & Supernatural, 62, 65).