

JUSTIN MARTYR'S *LOGOS*: ITS IMPORT FOR DIALOGICAL THEOLOGY

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Abstract:

Written ages ago, insights from the Fathers of the Church have shed light upon the way of doing theology from generation to generation until today. Their contribution is long-lived and such is also true in the case of St. Justin Martyr. His pivotal idea of *logos spermatikos*, developed to cross and connect the then seemingly unbridgeable systems—Greek philosophy and Christianity—proves to be valuable to this day. A rereading of his thought can be fruitful for constructing a way of doing theology that is open to the world, for the key concept of this apologetic father invites one to do theology not from one's small enclosed world, but from the perspective of a dialogue; hence the related metaphors are encounter, connectedness, and conversation. Contemporary theologians whose concern is to keep creating a more dialogical theology may benefit from Justin Martyr's exploration of *logos*. His legacy helps theologians today obtain a new vision. In this way, reading the Church Fathers is not so much of a study on some irrelevant fossils as a leap towards an ever-better future of doing theology.

Keywords:

logos spermatikos • *Church Fathers* • *Justin Martyr* • *Greek philosophy* • *dialogical theology* • *relationality*

Introduction

It is undeniable that doing theology cannot be separated from the study of the Fathers of the Church as “the Fathers of the Church, both of the East and West, have contributed towards the faithful transmission and elucidation of each of the revealed truths”.¹ Serving as a bridge between what the apostles have passed on and what the Church teaches², the Fathers of the Church are extensively referred to in the documents of the Vatican II. Considering this significant import, this article offers a small contribution by highlighting the idea of *logos spermatikos* in the theology of St. Justin Martyr. This idea has proven to be useful in constructing a dialogical theology.

The first part of this article deals with a description of who St. Justin Martyr is and how he develops his thought. These serve as the background, and delineating from the reading of both the secondary and primary sources, we will move on to his idea of *Logos*. In the final part, particularly with the help of references to the third Louvain Encounters in Systematic Theology in 2001 as a new framework of understanding what doing theology is, an idea of dialogical theology will be presented. Apart from the primary sources from the writings of St. Justin³, the secondary sources from Erwin R. Goodenough, L. W. Barnard, and Willis A. Shotwell are of great importance for this article.

A Man’s Search: From Philosophy to Christ

Justin Martyr was a seeker of truth. He set about his search by studying philosophy but found no ‘real’ truth in it. He studied several different philosophical thoughts, but it was not until he came across Christianity did he find the truth. He stood for the credibility of Christian faith.⁴ However, as what is going to be shown later, his extensive philosophical background played a great role in his theology.

Along with Clement and Origen, St. Justin Martyr was a thinker who managed to harmoniously connect Christianity to Greek philosophy. Tertullian called him *philosophus et martyr*,⁵ a double-title that is actually an answer to his own question “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?”⁶

The two categories, viz. philosopher and martyr, correspond to Athens and Jerusalem respectively. When a philosopher is martyred because of his Christian faith, it means that the two categories germinate and develop perfectly in him and hence, there was a synthesis of Athens and Jerusalem in St. Justin Martyr.

*Justin Martyr's Life and Writings*⁷

Justin Martyr was born a pagan descendant at Flavia Neapolis, a city not far from Sychem. Although the date of his birth is not certain, studies by experts suggest that it was around A.D. 114. Based on the studies on Justin's writings, L. W. Barnard explains the mixed backgrounds of Justin as follows.

“Justin was...a Samaritan by birth although nothing in his writings suggests that he was familiar with Samaritan traditions or religion... He classes himself with those gentiles... He speaks of being brought up in Gentile customs, of being uncircumcised and of having received a Greek education. The name of his grandfather Bacchius is Greek; of his father Priscus and of himself Latin. Little can be salvaged from these details –possibly Justin's ancestors were colonists who had settled in Flavia Neapolis...”⁸

Justin Martyr made significant contributions to the theological world through the many writings which are identified as his, although they are now generally believed to fall into three different categories. The *first* are those that are clearly his writings, which include the two apologies and the dialogue with Trypho. The *second* category consists of those regarded as Justin's by some but not by others.⁹ To the *third* category fall those writings that are undeniably not of Justin.¹⁰

In his search for truth, Justin assiduously studied philosophy from one school to another. First, he was attached to a Stoic philosopher. Nevertheless, he was not satisfied because the philosopher did not teach him about God and even told him that God was among the non-essentials. Then, he found a Peripatetic philosopher who charged him some tuition fee. He thought of him as an impostor and left the school. A Pythagorean philosopher whom he found interesting then came across his philosophical journey. However, the philosopher required his pupil to have been trained

in music, astronomy, and geometry. As he had not been trained in those subjects, he was dismissed. Finally came Platonism that could then solve his perplexity. In Platonism he discovered the “immaterial conceptions and the world of Ideas and was so rapidly growing in his mystical hold upon these that he hoped soon to come to the goal of Platonism and experience the vision of God”.¹¹

As explained in his *Dialogue*, Justin’s conversion to Christianity began with his encounter with an Old Man. This served as a beautiful personification of an ideal Christian meeting him on his Platonic ground and ushering him toward Christianity.¹²

Justin Martyr’s Theology

From his religious quest, which is thoroughly autobiographical in spirit,¹³ Justin, in his *Dialogue with Trypho* 3, defines philosophy as “the knowledge of the existing One and the Understanding of the Truth” and God as “that which is fixed eternally in its nature and mode of being and is the cause of existence to all things else”. It is clear how Justin’s journey that began from his understanding of philosophy progresses to the idea of God. For him, philosophy is the knowledge about God and its end is the vision of God and growing to be like God.¹⁴ The abstraction in philosophy leads men towards mysticism: contemplating God, having the vision of God. Men are able to have this contemplation and vision but the ethical impurity prevents them from doing so.¹⁵

The ideas of God and of humans then lead him to reflect upon the nature of the soul and it is on Platonism that his theological view on the soul is based. For Justin, the correct platonic doctrine does not teach the eternity of the world and with it the souls of humans. Both “must be mortal and begotten and live only by the will of God and therefore when God ceases to will, they perish”.¹⁶ He certainly has the idea of the distinction between body and soul; nevertheless, he tries to harmonize this distinction with the more unified anthropology in the Bible. God supports the life of the soul in a body by willing it to live and by letting it partake in life as God’s attribute.

Justin wrote primarily as a Christian¹⁷ as shown in his many references to the Old Testament and their interpretation in the Christian tradition. Nonetheless, much ink has been spilt over whether the Gospels that he frequently referred to as memoirs or records of the apostles are the Gospels that we know of today.¹⁸ The debate has a lot to do with the periods of the writing since it is generally agreed that, although Justin wrote in the middle of second century, the Gospels were not written until the end of the first century. At the time when he wrote, the Gospels as we know them today were indeed in circulation but they were not in exactly the same forms as we have nowadays.

His use of the Gospels is evident from the study of Shotwell, who notes that in both the *Apologies* and the *Dialogue*, Justin used the Old Testament to point to Jesus Christ as Logos of God in whom all humans should believe.¹⁹ Justin interpreted the Old Testament in the light of “the New Testament” in the form that he knew in those days.

Logos

The Birth of the Idea

There are undoubtedly great complications about the relationship between Athens and Jerusalem and Tertullian's question about this relationship clearly reflects it. Despite the fact that Christianity utilizes a great deal of Greek philosophical terms, it is not of Greek origin. However, the encounter of Christianity with Greek philosophy provides a lot of vocabularies needed especially because Christianity needs a language to speak of the faith.²⁰ This is what happens as we are trying to understand Justin's idea of Logos. It is important to bear in mind the distinction between the impulse, which produced the philosophic Logos doctrine, and the practical necessity, which induced Christians very early to appropriate the term for their own use.²¹

Furthermore, in Greek philosophy, there is no single idea of Logos. In the Stoic circles, however, the word ‘Logos’ is interchangeable with the word ‘God’. In all other circles, in a manner of speaking, the word ‘Logos’ is a link which connects a transcendent Absolute with the world

and humanity.²² Put it simply, the idea of Logos in Greek philosophy is a matter of a philosophical speculative reflection, which is not the case with Christianity as Christianity is primarily a religious experience; and when that very experience needs to be put into words, the need for vocabulary arises.

The approach of Christianity, as a matter of fact, is more from below; that is, how a definite and historical person could be represented as a cosmic deity: the person of the crucified and risen Christ whom the early Christian community could not think of as an ordinary man, despite the fact that he had taught them to worship not himself but God.²³ This is also what preoccupies Justin to reflect on Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

It is here that Justin begins his reflection on Logos by stating that the Father of the universe has a Son; who also, being the first begotten Word of the God, is a God.²⁴ Justin proves this thesis by presenting two arguments. The first one is from theophany and the second from some passages in the Old Testament where God speaks to some other God.

Explaining to Trypho that Christ is God²⁵, Justin refers to Genesis 18 where God appeared to Abraham under the oak of Mamre and the great discussion occurred concerning the burning of Sodom and Gomorrah. He continues to quote the appearance of God on several occasions: Jacob's dream of the spotted rams and goats, his wrestling, his change of name at Luz, his dream at Bethel and a little further on the burning bush. In all these passages, Justin emphasizes on two points: the independent personality of this Being who can be manifested to man and His divine nature.²⁶ That is the argument from theophany.

The second argument is based on Genesis 1:25, where God is speaking to another God.

And the same sentiment was expressed, my friends, by the word of God [written] by Moses, when it indicated to us, with regard to Him whom it has pointed out, that God speaks in the creation of man with the very same design, in the following words: 'Let Us make man after our image and likeness.'²⁷

Some Jewish teachers say that it is God's soliloquy; that is, He addresses Himself. Others would conjecture that He addresses the "elements to wit the earth and other similar substances of which we believe man was

formed” and still others say that He spoke to the angels who themselves proceeded to create human’s body.²⁸ Justin, however, claims that in the passage God addresses another person, a rational being, who was numerically distinct from Himself.²⁹

Cosmic and Universal

God begat this begotten thing before all creation.³⁰ Thus here, the Logos’ pre-incarnate state, as the writer of the fourth gospel puts it, is with God and is God. Although Justin gives no clear explanation about the time in which Logos was begotten, it goes without saying that it took place before the creation because Logos is the beginning before all created things.³¹ By doing this, Justin does not make too sharp a distinction between God and Logos. Based on *Dial.* 127 and 60, Goodenough explains that for Justin, Christ is also God according to God’s will and He is an Angel because He ministers to God’s purpose.³² This identification of Jesus Christ, the Logos, with the angels creates discomfort to later Christian Apologists. However, this confusion is actually because of the inadequacy of the Greek philosophy to put into words the Christian religious experience. Some experts, nonetheless, suggest that this identification has a lot to do with the Philonic tradition.

Justin goes on further to reveal the cosmic and universal significance of the Logos. In *Ap. I.* 55, where Justin discusses the cosmic significance of the cross, he mentions that the cross is “the great symbol of his (the Logos) power and rule”, an omnipresent symbol (“the sails of ship”, “ploughs”, “human form”, “banners”). Furthermore, Justin clearly states how that same Logos has a spermatik character which underlines this cosmic and universal character. He uses the term *logos spermatikos* and, in the Stoic tradition, it is

“... represented a very fine gas which flowed, among other bodily senses and functions, into the damp seminal fluid, and which was the active element, the truly germinal property, of the entire sexual excretion. When this gaseous element from the male united with a similar gaseous flow in the female, the germination took place. As a figure this term was applied to God to indicate that in the universal Matter ... [t]he active

element was called the *logos spermatikos*...The logos as spermatic had to do with creation and providence, was at once a spiritual principle of life (i.e. a *pneuma*) and a regulating principle which could rule the world.”³³

This act of borrowing the term from Greek philosophy results in the true manifestation of the cosmic and universal character of Logos. Interpreted that way, the confusion about the “somewhat” identification of Jesus Christ as the Logos with angels vanishes into thin air. The spermatic Logos is that very element in the universe, permeating the universe, the *pneuma* of human.

The spermatic Logos is the seed of the universe, which was then manifested fully in the incarnation, that is, into the womb of Mary and became the God-man Christ.³⁴ St. Justin borrows the Greek philosophy but then harmonizes it with the religious experience of Christianity: God is the principle behind the universe and that God manifested Himself fully by entering into human temporality and contingent history by being made flesh in Jesus Christ so that humans are able to participate in the divinity precisely because everybody has that element of spermatic Logos.

Here are the two key paragraphs about the spermatic Logos and the consequence of the idea.

“For I myself, when I discovered the wicked disguise which the evil spirits had thrown around the divine doctrines of the Christians, to turn aside others from joining them, laughed both at those who framed these falsehoods, and at the disguise itself, and at popular opinion; and I confess that I both boast and with all my strength strive found a Christian; not because the teachings Plato are different from those of Christ, but because they are not in all respects similar, as neither are those of the others, Stoics, and poets, and historians. For each man spoke well in proportion to the share he had of the spermatic word [*logos spermatikos*], seeing what was related to it.”³⁵

“We have been taught that Christ is the first-born of God, and we have declared above that He is the Word of whom every race of men were partakers; and those who lived reasonably are Christians, even though they have been thought atheists; as, among the, Greeks, Socrates and Heraclitus, and men like them; and among the barbarians, Abraham, and Ananias, and Azarias, and Misael, and Elias, and many others whose actions and names we now decline to recount, because we know it would be tedious.”³⁶

There are several interesting insights from the two paragraphs above. First, despite the fact that his ideas were not yet fully in accordance with Christianity, Justin found some veritable ideas from his quest through several philosophical schools. It is indicated by the references he made to Plato, Stoics, poets, and historians. Second, in his attempt to harmonize all with the Christian tradition, he found the idea of *logos spermatikos* adequate to explain things in common between the Christianity in the concept of the philosophers and the idea of Jesus Christ as the incarnate God. This *logos spermatikos* is cosmic and universal and is somehow efficacious in the universe; this leads to the third insight: all humans must partake in it. The participation is explicit when one lives reasonably. Therefore, he calls all those who lived reasonably Christians.

Dialogical Theology: New Metaphors toward Dialogue

After presenting Justin's *Logos*, I come to an important conclusion that, although generally classified as apologetic³⁷, Justin's theology is dialogical. He is a theologian in dialogue with Greek philosophy. Therefore, Justin's big contribution for us today is that he encourages us to do a dialogical theology. Faith is not ahistorical, nor is it inexpressible in the language of the present. Theology is always contextual: a respond to a certain context. Justin is doing a dialogical theology by bringing about a creative dialogue between faith and the context.

In the introduction of the Louvain Encounters in Systematic Theology (LEST) 2001, Jacques Haers mentions that the hermeneutical circle between theology and reality as construed by some of our "classical" approaches does not seem to fit in well with what one may expect from theology as a stimulating articulation of reality that allows to formulate creative and responsible answer to real life challenges, viz., postmodernity, globalization, interreligious and intercultural dialogues, suffering caused by poverty, insecurity, environmental degradation and injustice.³⁸ With this strong statement, he is prompting theologians to rethink and refresh their ways of doing theologies and move toward those that are closer to the reality of today's world. LEST is one of the many theological events

that build a new vision in theology, a dialogical one. Some contemporary theologians like Karl Rahner, Robert Schreier, Stephen Bevans, Bradford E. Hinze put a strong emphasis on dialogical theology as well.

Instead of addressing the irrelevancy at the superficial level, Haers invites theologians to build new root metaphors: encounter, connectedness, and conversation.³⁹ These three root metaphors are not new since some theologians have already resorted to them. Haers mentions specifically Origen and Rahner as two of such theologians who do theology on the bases of those three root metaphors. One of the keys to be able to do so is to look at the history of theology to discover that there is a long tradition of theologians working from this relational perspective.⁴⁰

Justin Martyr can be categorized as a theologian working from such relational perspective as well. His previous encounters with some schools of Greek philosophy before his conversion to Christianity do not denigrate what he has learnt from them. From the Christian tradition, he converses with them and discovers possibilities of expressing the Christian tradition in the language of Greek philosophy. Moreover, he chooses the form of dialogue to present his idea. His dialogue with Trypho, which is more than just a literary style, conveys a deeper message, that is, an appeal toward dialogue. As concerning interconnectedness,⁴¹ Justin's *logos spermatikos* has paved the way toward a consciousness of interconnectedness, which is prior to the constitution of the I as subject which, as a matter of fact, originates in the web and in the histories of encounters of which it has always been a part.

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Endnotes:

- 1 Cf. *Optatam Totius*, 16.
- 2 Cf. Y. Congar, *La tradizione e le tradizioni*, 59-60.
- 3 All references to the works of St. Justin Martyr are from A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (eds.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325, Volume I: The Apostolic Fathers-Justin Martyr-Irenaeus*.
- 4 W. Henn, *One Faith: Biblical and Patristic Contributions Toward Understanding Unity in Faith*, 94.
- 5 P. J. Hamell, *Handbook of Patrology*, 38.
- 6 Tertullian, *de Praescr.* 7, *Apol.* 46, quoted from H. Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition: Studies in Justin, Clement, Origen*, 1.
- 7 For this part, I summarize L.W. Barnard, *Justin Martyr: His Life and Thought*, 1-26; E. R. Goodenough, *The Theology of Justin Martyr*, 57-77; P. J. Hamell, *Handbook of Patrology*, 38-42; and H. Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition: Studies in Justin, Clement, Origen*, 1-30.
- 8 L.W. Barnard, *Justin Martyr: His Life and Thought*, 5.
- 9 1. An Address to the Greeks; 2. A Hortatory Address to the Greeks; 3. On the Sole Government of God; 4. An Epistle to Diognetus; 5. Fragments from a work on the Resurrection; 6. Other Fragments.
- 10 1. An Exposition of the True Faith; 2. Replies to the Orthodox; 3. Christian Questions to Gentiles; 4. Gentile Questions to Christians; 5. Epistle to Zenas and Serenus; and 6. A Refutation of certain Doctrines of Aristotle.
- 11 E. R. Goodenough, *The Theology of Justin Martyr*, 58.

- 12 *Ibid.*, 66.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 72.
- 14 Cf. *ibid.*, 64, cf. *Dial.* 2.6.
- 15 Cf. *ibid.*, 67-68.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 68.
- 17 L.W. Barnard, *Justin Martyr: His Life and Thought*, 53; Cf. W. A. Shotwell, *The Biblical Exegesis of Justin Martyr*, 116.
- 18 Cf. L.W. Barnard, *Justin Martyr: His Life and Thought*, 55-56.
- 19 W. A. Shotwell, *The Biblical Exegesis of Justin Martyr*, 8.
- 20 Cf. W. Henn, *Church: The People of God*, 50.
- 21 E. R. Goodenough, *The Theology of Justin Martyr*, 139.
- 22 *Ibid.*
- 23 *Ibid.*, 140.
- 24 *Ap.* I. 63.
- 25 *Dial.* 55-60.
- 26 Cf. E. R. Goodenough, *The Theology of Justin Martyr*, 143.
- 27 *Dial.* 62.
- 28 *Dial.* 62.
- 29 E. R. Goodenough, *The Theology of Justin Martyr*, 146.
- 30 *Dial.* 129. 4
- 31 *Dial.* 62. 4.
- 32 E. R. Goodenough, *The Theology of Justin Martyr*, 156.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 162.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 163-164.
- 35 *Ap.* II. 13.
- 36 *Ap.* I. 46.
- 37 W. Henn, *One Faith: Biblical and Patristic Contributions Toward Understanding Unity in Faith*, 197.
- 38 J. Haers, "Defensor Vinculi et Conversationis, Connectedness and Conversation as a Challenge to Theology" in J. Haers and P. De Mey (Eds.), *Theology and Conversation, Towards a Relational Theology*, 1-2.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 1.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 39.
- 41 Cf. *ibid.*, 7.