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ANCIENT GREEK THINKING

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Providence (*Pronoia*) in the Early Apologists and Creeds

Gunnar af Hällström

The structure of the early Christian creeds reflected the tripartite baptismal formula (“in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit”). The first part (or ‘article’¹) about the Creator is always rather short, followed by a much longer passage about Jesus Christ. The third part on the Spirit, the church and eschatology was, again, rather short. The length of the second part about the Son was partially a result of the duration of the Christological controversies in the fourth century. A few words and expressions derive from the doctrinal decisions of the Ecumenical councils, such as the famous *consubstantialis* (ὁμοούσιος). But the main part of the creeds derives from the baptismal teaching of the local churches – the Nicæan Creed, for example, from the creed of the church in Jerusalem (‘J’). But a clearly formulated tripartite formulation was present as early as in the end of the second century in the so called Old Roman Creed (‘R’).² In this creed the middle part was, again, more than double the length of the others. This is so also when the creed had an interrogative form: that is, when formulated as a question. In the early third century, the author of the *Traditio apostolica* presents it as follows:

When the person being baptized goes down into the water, he who baptizes him, putting his hand on him, shall say: ‘Do you believe in God, the Father Almighty?’ And the person being baptized shall say: ‘I believe.’ Then holding his hand on his head, he shall baptize him once. And then he shall say: ‘Do you believe in Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who was born of the Virgin Mary, and was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and was dead and buried, and rose again the third day, alive from the dead, and ascended into Heaven, and sat at the right hand of the Father, and will come to judge the living and the dead?’ And when he says: ‘I believe,’ he is baptized again. And again he shall say: ‘Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, in the holy church, and the resurrection of the body?’ The person being baptized shall say: ‘I believe,’ and then he is baptized a third time.³

The section about the Son surpasses by far those about the Father and the Spirit, even though the creed is Trinitarian in structure.

Strangely enough, the writings of the second-century apologists, though contemporaneous with the first versions of the Old Roman Creed, do not reflect this concentration on the second article of faith, that concerning Jesus Christ. In their teaching the presentation of God the Father and Creator is the most extensive one, whereas the second article is short or even non-existent. The teaching contained in the third article of the

¹ All basic doctrinal definitions may be called ‘articles of faith’, but on the other hand, the three main parts of the early Creeds may be called ‘articles’ as well. In this article, the term ‘article’ is used in the latter sense.

² Kelly has a chapter on the Old Roman Creed in his famous study *Early Christian Creeds* (third edition 1972). The estimates concerning the date of the origin of R. vary from the beginning of the second century to the last decades of it. This vagueness is understandable because baptismal creeds existed already in New Testament times and developed only slowly towards a greater length and fixity of expression.

³ *Ap. Trad.* 21.16–40.

creeds is, again, a bit more detailed in their presentation, usually containing a discussion on the resurrection of the body and everlasting life. This inversion of emphasis between the articles of faith is, in itself, worth considering. What happened to the Christocentric teaching of the early church in the writings of the apologists? The distance between the apostolic fathers and the apologists is considerable as regards Christocentricity, though these two groups of authors were active roughly at the same period of time. The apostolic fathers and the early creeds seem to represent a united front against the apologist in this central question.

There are, of course, differences between the apologists themselves regarding the emphasis on Christology. If we include the Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho* among the apologies, we find in fact quite a lot of Christological discussion there. Probably this is the case as the opponent was a biblically erudite Jew, accepting the expectation of a coming Messiah. Justin also seems to have known of an exclusively Christological confession alongside the Trinitarian one.⁴ But the fact remains that the early apologies concentrated on God the Father and Creator. This was so already in New Testament times. From Paul's apologetic speech on the Areopagus (*Acts* 17:22–31) all the way to Athenagoras' *Legatio* we can notice this trend: the first article of faith is predominant. Neither of these two works even mentions the name of Christ, a feature quite remarkable in writings defending and presenting Christian faith. Paul just refers to "a man appointed by God to judge the world", which is a rather modest presentation of Jesus Christ. Aristides of Athens, wishing to explain the origin of Christian religion, has a short passage on Christ, forming just a fraction of the entire treatise.⁵ The *Letter to Diognetus*, often printed together with the apostolic fathers but in fact an apology dedicated to a single person,⁶ provides a theoretical basis for the disproportionate presentations of the Father and Son. "If you desire this (Christian) faith", the author says, "first of all learn to know [...] the Father."⁷ This principle seems to suggest that the presentation of the principles of Christian faith had to follow a certain order. The apologists rarely got beyond the first person in the Trinity.

The New Testament, early Christian literature in general and the early creeds in particular differ from the apologists at least in one more regard: only the apologists made use of the term Providence (Πρόνοια, *Providentia*).⁸ In fact they were the ones that introduced this term, so popular in later theological reflection into Christianity. The doctrine of divine Providence belongs traditionally in the context presenting God the Father, a presentation that is remarkably detailed in the apologetic writings. In the following we will analyse what the apologists meant by Providence, why they introduced the term and why they elaborated a theology connected to the term. All this will be done with a Christocentric concept of Christianity in mind.

The apologies are, as is well known, strongly polemical texts. Thus, it is hardly surprising that Providence is also treated in them in a polemical manner. The polemic is directed towards Graeco-Roman paganism and philosophy, but also to some extent against Judaism. In the *Letter to Diognetus*, the argument goes as follows: if God provides

⁴ See Kelly 1972, 75.

⁵ *Apol.* chapter 2 in the Syriac version.

⁶ See the Preliminaries in the article of J. Blomqvist in this volume.

⁷ *Ad Diogn.* 10.1: Πρῶτον μὲν λάβης ἐπίγνωσιν πατρός.

⁸ See the presentation of the word/term πρόνοια by Behm 1968, 1012.

humankind with all things needed, what sense is there in presenting offerings to God?⁹ He already has everything. In other words, humans should not be acting as subjects, expected to give gifts to needy gods, for in fact they are the objectives or targets, those who receive gifts from the richness of the Creator. The argument has force only if it is accepted that Providence really looks after humans – the tract presupposes that the readers do hold such a view. As for the Jews, the anonymous author of *Ad Diognetum* is less certain about their attitudes: using the optative, he states that the Jews should regard paganism as insane, since the heathen humans provide for the divinity, not the other way round.¹⁰ If the argument of the author is simplified and exaggerated, one might venture the following conclusion: the difference between Christianity and paganism consists of the fact that according to the former, men receive gifts from God, whereas the pagans think that they should present gifts to the gods. And the latter kind of behaviour is, according to the author, sheer madness. What can be given to a person who already has it all? Underpinning the author's argumentation is the early Christian concept of God being ἀνενδεής.¹¹ The *Letter to Diognetus* applies the tenet in the discussion concerning Providence. The biblical background provides the polemic against sacrifices, as fulminated by the Old Testament prophets.

Another aspect of the polemical use of Providence is presented by Aristides of Athens. As his *Apology* is written as early as in the 120s, the argument must be one of the oldest against the Graeco-Roman religion. In the description of the traditional Greek gods, Aristides notes that they need help themselves. He describes them one by one and shows their vulnerability. His conclusion is: gods needing help are unable to help humans.¹² In other words, they cannot guarantee the manner of intervention provided by Providence. What he does not mention, however, is that the same traditional Greek gods, in spite of their limitations, often intervened on behalf of their favourites among humans, according to the great Greek poets.

A third argument based on Providence against the pagans is to be found in Theophilus of Antioch. The Greek gods, Zeus explicitly mentioned among them, are local gods.¹³ Being limited locally, they cannot be active, as is Providence, on behalf of humans everywhere. But, and this Theophilus does not say, in spite of their local limitation, or perhaps precisely because of this limitation, they were able to provide for and help the locals. Athena could help the Athenians, and that was good enough, most locals would probably have argued.¹⁴

The above-mentioned arguments against the concept of Providence in the Graeco-Roman religion could not be effective against thinkers denying Providence altogether. The apologists were well aware of the existence of such persons. There are those, according to Justin's *Second Apology*, who maintain that God may exist or not, but at any rate he

⁹ *Ad Diogn.* 3.4.

¹⁰ *Ad Diogn.* 3.3.

¹¹ *PGL*, 133 refers to Justin Martyr, Athenagoras and Clement of Alexandria among the second-century authors.

¹² *Apol.* repeatedly in chapters 10–13, the Syriac text.

¹³ *Ad Autol.* 2.3. But in *Ad Autol.* 2.8, Theophilus presents a lengthy quotation from Aratus which contradicts the idea of Zeus being locally restricted: "Let us take our beginning from Zeus, whom we men never leave unmentioned; all highways are full of Zeus, all market-places; full are the sea and the harbours; everywhere we all have need of Zeus. For we are his offspring [...]." Translation by R.M. Grant 1970.

¹⁴ The cult of Athena Pronoia confirms our conclusion. See *RE* 23.1, s.v. πρόνοια 745–746.

does not take an interest in humans.¹⁵ The ethical consequence of this view is also stated: in such a case we can do whatever we wish – since God does not care, even if he exists. Theodorus of Cyrene, Diagoras of Melos and even Protagoras of Abdera are mentioned as famous atheists. But those denying the existence of Providence were in minority. No ink was wasted on these ‘extremists’ since the apologists concentrated on those sharing at least some convictions with them.¹⁶

The apologists knew Providence to be a generally accepted belief among non-Christians. They felt that they shared this conviction with a multitude of peoples on earth – with the Old Testament prophets, Greek poets such as Euripides and with most philosophers, as well as with the Sibylla.¹⁷ Providence as the Christians conceive it is the best possible Providence, but belief in it is universal, not only Christian or Jewish.

The early Christian missionary sermons often used the generally accepted belief in Providence as a point of departure. This is the case in apostle Paul and Barnabas’ speech in Iconium.¹⁸ Here the belief in the Creator is mentioned first. Then follows an exhortation to make a conversion to God who “has not left you without some clue to his nature, in the kindness he shows: he sends you rain from heaven and crops in their season, and gives you food and good cheer in plenty.” Providence is not a cause for polemic, it is the argument for why people should convert to the Christian God. Apostle Paul’s Areopagus Speech in Athens presents even more clearly the belief in Providence as a common ground, a belief uniting rather than separating Christians and non-Christians.¹⁹ The fundamental consensus concerning the existence of Providence is not shaken by the above-mentioned limitations of the Homeric gods. As in so many other cases, the apologists side with Greek philosophy rather than with their poetry and religion. And, once again, the attitude is decisively eclectic: Plato and the Stoics are their support against Aristotle and Democritus. One of the non-Christian texts, quoted frequently with approval among the apologists and early church fathers, is Plato’s *Timaeus* in general and section 28c in particular, since Plato presupposes the existence and benevolent providence of ‘the Father and Maker’ of the universe.

Do ut des is the main non-Christian principle of ancient religious thinking: humans give sacrifices in order to get something (else) in return. Later on, within Christianity, another principle was formulated: *da quod iubes, et iube quod vis* (Augustine). In other words: God is expected to give a gift first, and humans can react to God’s generosity – though not by making sacrifices. A fresh attempt to define the difference between the Christian and non-Christian positions would therefore look like this: though both parties agree that there is such a thing as divine Providence, they disagree as to whether god/God needs sacrifices for one reason or other. The *do ut des* principle seems to suggest that the initiative lies with the humans, and God/the gods react, whereas the Christians claim that

¹⁵ 2 *Apol.* 9.

¹⁶ Athenagoras, *De res.* 19.2 is an exception, debating in brief with “those who disagree on the fundamentals”.

¹⁷ Theophilus, *Ad Autol.* 2.8 states rather pessimistically that there are both defenders and opponents of Providence among the non-Christians. His aim is, however, to show the inconsistency of non-Christian thinkers. Athenagoras describes the situation as follows: “Those who [...] accept the same first principles as we do (i.e. the existence of Providence), and then for some strange reason repudiate their own presuppositions.” *De resurrectione* 19.1. Non-Christian thinkers are not only in disagreement among themselves, but sometimes also inconsistent in their teaching (on Providence).

¹⁸ *Acts* 14:14–17.

¹⁹ *Acts* 17:22–31.

the initiative is within God, in his goodness, and humans react. As apostle Paul put it in his Areopagus Speech: “God did this (providential works) so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him.”²⁰

The non-polemic teaching on Providence in the writings of the apologists is most conveniently opened with the names and attributes God is said to have. This is so since God being Providence is repeatedly deduced from his names. The most famous passage in this respect is probably that of Theophilus of Antioch in the beginning of his *Ad Autolycum*:

He is called God because he established everything on his own steadfastness [*Ps.* 103:5] and because he runs; the word ‘run’ means to run and set in motion and energize and nourish and provide and govern everything and to make everything alive.²¹

Theophilus has noted the closeness between the words ‘God’ (Θεός) and the verb θέειν, which means ‘to run.’ The dictionary of Liddell, Scott and Jones provides examples how the verb was used: persons, horses, birds and the potter’s wheel are said to θέειν.²² But God is not. This etymology is not a creation of Theophilus. It derives from Plato’s *Cratylus* 379d. The context is, however, different: Plato wrote about heavenly bodies ‘running’ in space. The movements of these heavenly gods are not connected to Providence. Even if the etymology is probably incorrect, from the point of view of the history of ideas it is remarkable that the ‘unmoved mover’ introduced by Aristotle has changed into a God who both ‘runs’ himself for the benefit of his creatures and also makes these move.²³ So much so, that he got his name from this providential running. In his definition of Theos, Theophilus explains it by using verbs such as κινεῖν, ἐνεργεῖν, τρέφειν and, most importantly for our topic, προνοεῖν as well as κυριεύειν and ζωοποιεῖν τὰ πάντα. All these activities signify somehow variations of God’s providence towards his creation.

Theophilus’ definitions of the names Κύριος, Πατήρ and Δημιουργός also illustrate different aspects of God taking care of his world. The attribute ‘Father’ is particularly worth noting in this respect. In the early Christian Creeds, divine Providence is not mentioned *expressis verbis*. But in every single one, we find the attribute ‘Father’. Admittedly, this attribute can be understood as the Father of Christ, the Son, since the creeds continue by presenting the Son. But in Theophilus’ definition, ‘Father’ is related to the universe: he is the Father τῶν ὅλων.²⁴ This expression is also found in Plato’s above-mentioned statement, repeatedly quoted by the apologists and church fathers, according to which it is hard to find τὸν Πατέρα καὶ ποιητὴν τῶν ὅλων. Also in Plato God is referred

²⁰ *Acts* 17:27.

²¹ *Ad Autol.* 1.4, translation by R.M. Grant 1970.

²² *LSJ* s.v. θέειν.

²³ Theophilus’ etymology does not work in Latin, but the idea that God is constantly running is also present in Minucius Felix’s dialogue *Octavius*. Caecilius, an opponent of Christianity, is presented as saying: “But the Christians, moreover, what wonders, what monstrosities do they feign! – that he who is their God [...] he runs about everywhere, and is everywhere present: they make him out to be troublesome, restless, even shamelessly inquisitive, since he is present at everything that is done, wanders in and out in all places.” *Oct.* 10, transl. *ANF* 4.178.

²⁴ In Latin, God is called *parens omnium* by Minucius Felix (*Oct.* 18.7, 19.1). Kelly 1977, 83 claims that in the second century, “‘Father’ referred primarily to His role as creator and author of all things.”

to as having created and now providing for the universe. The words of the Creed “We believe in One God, the Father” means, in the light of Theophilus, first of all “We believe that God cares” – since he is the Father. Providence is so strongly connected to the first person in the Trinity that the Son is mentioned only very rarely and only in passing as the instrument ‘through’ whom the Father exercises his providential activity.²⁵

Other attributes as well given to God the Father imply the existence of Providence. Κύριος means control all over the world, Theophilus says. The attribute just by itself does not make clear whether the person called Κύριος is good or bad, and his ruling over his territory is to the benefit or ruin of its inhabitants. But in a Christian context, Κύριος is a man-loving ruler, and Providence is implied in the attribute. The epithet Παντοκράτωρ is rare in the texts of the apologists. But it is mentioned and described by Theophilus in such a way as to indicate God’s providence. “He is called [...] Almighty because he controls and surrounds everything”, he says.²⁶ Providence is immanent in this name of God itself. One cannot be a ‘Παντοκράτωρ’ unless one actually controls all things. Thus, though Providence is not mentioned in the early Christian Creeds, there is reason to believe that it is indicated in such epithets as ‘Father’, ‘Lord’ and ‘Almighty.’²⁷

One of the apologists, Justin Martyr, discusses at some length what we might call *delegated* Providence. God takes care of his universe, but by using assistants, namely *angels*. Since angels and Judaism are combined a number of times in the apologetic literature, one could presume that angelic Providence would be discussed in Justin’s *Dialogue with Trypho*. This is, however, not the case, but the topic is discussed twice in the *Second Apology*, as in the fourth chapter:

When God made the universe and put all earthly things under man’s dominion, and arranged the heavenly bodies for the increase of fruits and the change of seasons, and decreed a divine law for these [...] He appointed His angels, whom He placed over mankind, to look after men and all things under heaven.²⁸

According to this passage, God takes care of the whole universe, whereas the angels take care of men and the sublunary world, and humans look after plants, animals and things ‘below’ the humans. Humans imitate God when they take care of each other and carry each other’s burdens, the *Letter to Diognetus* says.²⁹ But we should probably not think in spatial categories here: the idea is not that God is far away, the humans on earth and the angels mediating in between. In the same way as humans and animals are

²⁵ Athenagoras says that God “rules the universe through the Word that issues from him” (*Leg. pro Christ.* 10.1). But even here, the subject exercising providence is the Father.

²⁶ *Ad Autol.* 1.4. It is worth noting that the gods presented in Seneca’s *De Providentia* are not almighty, nor is the creator and ruler of the universe almighty. They are subordinate to Providence, which is the highest principle of all (*Prov.* 5).

²⁷ Scheffczyk 1963, 29 concludes quite correctly (though not referring explicitly to the apologists): “Dass in keinem dieser Symbole die göttliche Vorsehung ausdrücklich Erwähnung findet, besagt keineswegs ein vollständiges Fehlen dieser Wahrheit in ihnen; den zunächst schwingt im Vaterbegriff wie in der von der Stoa beeinflussten παντοκράτωρ-Formel der Gedanke an die Welterhaltung durch den Schöpfergott mit, zumal wenn man bedenkt, dass in der Frühzeit das griechische παντοκράτωρ vielfach mit dem lateinischen *omnitenens* wiedergegeben wurde.”

²⁸ *2 Apol.* 5, translation by T.B. Falls 2003.

²⁹ *Diogn.* 10.6.

not situated in different worlds but in one and the same, but the humans are nevertheless in charge of the animals, thus God, the angels and men are not necessarily understood as being spatially in different worlds. There is just an order of operation within the one world. This point needs to be emphasized, since the apologists do not, in spite of the stress on God's transcendence, think that our world is void of God. God is omnipresent, he is close to everybody (as stated already in the Areopagus Speech), but he takes care of the world in a certain order, where angels do have their place. If omnipresence is denied, we end up in the same position attributed to non-Christians according to which Zeus, for example, is locally limited and consequently unable to take care of the world in its entirety.

Justin continues, after having stated how Providence is using angels, by saying that the angels *fell*, and so did the humans.³⁰ Are we entitled to draw the conclusion that, consequently, Providence is not any more what it was meant to be? Unfortunately, Justin does not elucidate the consequences of the fall for Providence: is it more or less defective in the present situation, or even destroyed, or arranged differently than it was originally intended? Theologically, it makes an enormous difference whether we think that Providence works perfectly even now, and every single event is planned and provided by God, or whether we think that the world is out of order, though neither abandoned nor outside the power of God.

Despite the fall, Providence includes, according to the apologists, all places and all kinds of beings. This was suggested above in the text quoted about from Aristides dealing with God, angels and humans in the activity of Providence. Theophilus agrees:

We acknowledge a God, but only one, the Founder and Maker and Demiurge of this whole universe. We know that everything (τὰ πάντα) is governed by providential care, but by him alone.³¹

And later on, Theophilus writes:

The world is not uncreated nor is there spontaneous production of everything [...] instead, the world is created and is providentially governed by the God who made everything.³²

Again, the object of Providence is τὰ πάντα and the (whole) κόσμος. Attention should be drawn to the fact that Providence is not an impersonal power, or a (Roman) goddess such as *Providentia Romana*. It is identical with the One God, the Father and Creator.

A philosophical discussion took place as to how far Providence would go into the details. Justin Martyr, in his *Dialogue with Trypho*, states that philosophers may accept that Providence takes care of big things, but deny its concern for insignificant matters.³³

³⁰ 2 *Apol.* 5. Papias presents a similar view: "Papias thus speaks, word for word [sic] word: To some of the angels He gave dominion over the arrangement of the world, and He commissioned them to exercise their dominion well. And he says, immediately after this: but it happened that their arrangement came to nothing." Translation by Roberts and Donaldson 1885.

³¹ *Ad Autol.* 3.9, translation by R.M. Grant 1970.

³² *Ad. Aut.* 3.26, translation R.M. Grant 1970.

³³ 2 *Apol.* 9. Plato, *Leges* X 900d seems to have embraced the view that Providence includes minor beings also, whereas Cicero thought that *magna dii curant, parva negligunt* (*De natura deorum* 51–56).

Or, more philosophically expressed, the godhead takes care of the universe, the general and even the species on earth – but not of the individuals. The apologist(s) disagree with such views, though the idea that God externalized some parts of his providential work to angels has a certain affinity with them. You and I, Justin Martyr says, are included in *Providentia divina*. God's care reaches down even to us as individuals. If it did not, prayer would be useless.³⁴ Athenagoras, sometimes regarded as Ps-Athenagoras, argues as Justin did before him:

Those who accept God as Maker of our universe must ascribe to his wisdom and justice a concern to guard and provide for all created things [...] they must think of nothing either on earth or in heaven as unattended to or unprovided for, but must recognize that the Maker's care extends to everything, the invisible as well as the visible, the small and the great. For all created things need the care of their Maker, each one in its own way.³⁵

Athenagoras mentions the various species and their need of Providence, but he is not willing to catalogue all the species to show how they are provided for.³⁶ What is important here is the logic used. Since everything, big or small, is created by God, it follows that he cares for them all. *Nec universitati solummodo deus, sed et partibus consulit*.³⁷ The size of the creature is not important. Further, since God created also the invisible world, his Providence reaches even to the invisible beings! The apologists draw a picture of a universe totally dependent on God, allowing no exceptions, a concept which irritated the non-Christian Caecilius in the dialogue *Octavius*, as will be shown below.

Having said all this, it should be clear that the non-Christians are included among the beneficiaries of Providence, as well as everything else in the universe. This was already clearly stated in the Areopagus Speech: God fixed the epochs of their history and the limits of their territory. And at Lystra, apostle Paul proclaimed: "God sends you rain from heaven and crops in their season, and gives you food and good cheer in plenty." Universal Providence is portrayed by Minucius Felix in a similar way, emphasizing the beneficial order in the world. He wishes to persuade the non-Christian Caecilius to accept faith in God:

For what can possibly be so manifest, so confessed, and so evident, when you lift your eyes up to heaven, and look into the things which are below and around, than that there is some Deity of most excellent intelligence, by whom all nature is inspired, is moved, is nourished, is governed?³⁸

³⁴ Just. *Dial.* 1.4. The translation of T.B. Falls 2003 does not make this argument sufficiently clear.

³⁵ *De res.* 18.2–3. Translated by W.R. Schoedel 1972. Cf. Scheffczyk 1963, 39 where the role of the angels is stressed – but even so Providence reaches down to the details.

³⁶ *De res.* 18.3.

³⁷ "God does not care only for the entire universe, but for its parts also." *Oct.* 18. The example of God's care that follows in *Octavius* is worth mentioning: Britain has not got much sunshine, but the surrounding sea keeps it warm! Seneca presents the same argument in favour of Providence, though not explicitly mentioning Britain: "The seas pour into the valleys and so temper the climate of the land" (*Prov.* 1). Minucius puts more emphasis on the individual, whereas Seneca stresses the universal aspect. The gods care more for all mankind than for individuals, the latter says (*Prov.* 3).

³⁸ *Oct.* 17. The whole chapter is dedicated to different aspects of Providence. The orderly movement of the universe with its parts seems to impress Minucius Felix the most. This is true also for Seneca, who regards the movements of the stars and their regularity as operations brought about by Providence (*Prov.* 1).

The fact of universal Providence opens up interesting, and maybe even daring, perspectives. How closely cared for are the non-Christians in the hands of God, according to the apologists? How much correct understanding of religion do they possess? Justin's doctrine of Logos living within men in general and within good philosophers in particular is well known. Plato was a kind of Christian before Christianity. Theophilus also suggests that Homer, Hesiod and Orpheus may have been instructed by divine providence (ἀπὸ θείας προνοίας μεμαθηκέναι).³⁹ But the Christians have even better instructors, he adds. Even so, there is no monopoly related to Providence. Clement of Alexandria denies that the partial truths seen by the Greek philosophers could be accidental:

Whether, then, they say that the Greeks gave forth some utterances of the true philosophy by accident, it is the accident of a divine administration (for no one will, for the sake of the present argument with us, deify chance; or by good fortune, good fortune is not unforeseen. Or were one, on the other hand, to say that the Greeks possessed a natural conception of these things, we know the one Creator of nature.⁴⁰

Thus, Providence extends to all, and to all areas of life. Further, it affects *dead people*, too. Theophilus quotes the *Book of Proverbs* (3:8) saying: "There will be healing for the flesh and treatment for the bones."⁴¹ It seems that in this passage, Providence is essentially a kind of grace, grace in the Pauline sense. This is particularly clear in the emphasis on God's care for the dead "bones" – these are not capable of doing good deeds, not even of praying or worshipping. But God takes care of them. Providence is not often mentioned by the apologists in connection with the deceased. But the resurrection of the dead is a central topic indeed! The doctrine of Providence brings a fresh aspect to the concept of grace: we can read it in the light of God's Providence that takes care of that which is nothing, analogous but not identical with the *creatio ex nihilo*. Creation out of nothing was, as we know from the fathers, understood as an act of God's love towards what was not even in existence. When meeting the creedal words *carnis resurrectionem* (σάρκὸς ἀνάστασιν) or *corporis resurrectionem* (σώματος ἀνάστασιν),⁴² we are probably entitled to understand that God's Providence and grace are included in the mention also.⁴³

Even the Last Judgement, following the general resurrection, may be seen as an act of God's providence. Athenagoras claims this in passing.⁴⁴ Justice demands a (final) judgement. Good and evil persons should get their due treatment, and the fact that they

³⁹ *Ad Autol.* 3.17: "Did not the poets Homer, Hesiod, and Orpheus say that they had been instructed by divine providence? Furthermore, it is said that there were diviners and seers at the time of the historians, and that people who learned from them wrote accurate histories. How much more, then, shall we know the truth, since we learn it from the holy prophets, who were filled with the holy Spirit of God?" The passage suggests that there is a difference in the degree of knowledge, not a contradiction between lies and the truth.

⁴⁰ *Strom.* 1. 19, transl. *ANF* 2.

⁴¹ *Ad Autol.* 2.38.

⁴² The Old Roman Creed used the expression *carnis resurrectio*, the resurrection of the flesh. I have shown elsewhere that the expression, though more precise than the other ones in use, is synonymous with *corporis resurrectio* and *resurrectio mortuorum*. See af Hällström 1988.

⁴³ This is the case already in *1 Clement* 24.5. The death of the seed and rise of a new plant is seen as a model of the future resurrection. But all this happens to the seed and plant through προνοία τοῦ δεσπότης. See also Athenagoras *De res.* 18.1.

⁴⁴ *De res.* 18.1. See the discussion in Bergjan 2002, 115–202.

will get it is a consequence of divine Providence. In other words, God takes care of all men, but this has negative consequences for the evil ones.

In Seneca's treatise *De Providentia* the central topic is why *good* people have to suffer.⁴⁵ The apologists do not treat this topic, at least not automatically, in spite of the extremely dangerous situation in which they and the other Christians were living. If anyone, *they* had a reason to ask God why the Christians had to suffer in the Roman Empire. How can God allow such injustice? But the apologists did not blame Providence, nor did Seneca – his friend Lucilius was the one who required a theodicy, an apology on behalf of Providence which allows good men to be treated badly. The accusations of the apologists were directed to the Roman politicians (to whom their apologies were written, in most cases). Do not blame God (Providence) for evils caused by the authorities, they seem to say.⁴⁶

In the apology called *Octavius*, Minucius Felix presents a pagan thinker called Caecilius. According to this Caecilius, there is no *divina providentia*. Therefore, good and bad people experience the same sufferings. According to Caecilius, in the hypothetical case that there is such a thing as Providence, we would be able to notice the effects of it. Socrates would not have received the lethal cup of poison. The harvests would never be destroyed by hailstorms, and so on.⁴⁷ Caecilius concludes: *Fortuna dominatur*. Blind coincidence rules, unrestrained by any laws.

Interestingly enough, Caecilius seems to be familiar with the above-mentioned Christian argument that Providence reaches down to the smallest details. The Christian God, he says, is so busy with small details that he has lost control over the entirety, over the universe. As a result, Caecilius concludes, it is quite logical that Christians believe that the universe will break down, so that heaven and earth will be dissolved.⁴⁸ He seems unable or unwilling to comprehend that Providence could comprise both the totality and the details: either/or has to be chosen. The answer of Octavius is remarkable. He presents an analogy from the sun and its beams:

Once more look at the sun: it is fixed fast in the heaven, yet it is diffused over all lands equally; present everywhere, it is associated and mingled with all things [...] How much more God, who has made all things, and looks upon all things, from whom there can be nothing secret, is present in the darkness, is present in our thoughts [...] Not only do we act in him, but also, I had almost said, we live with him.⁴⁹

Seneca and Minucius Felix give the same answer to the question why *boni*, i.e. 'good people' (the terminology of Seneca; Octavius speaks of Christians), have to suffer. Both speak with the same enthusiasm about how useful sufferings are, how little good people/Christians fear them, how they even voluntarily welcome sufferings, since they

⁴⁵ Seneca was in fact explicitly asked to answer this question: "You have asked me, Lucilius, why, if the world be ruled by providence, so many evils befall good men?" (*Prov.* 1).

⁴⁶ Justin seems to adopt a different view at least occasionally. In his *Dialogue with Trypho* 16.4, he states that the officials prevent the Jews from doing evil to the Christians. In other words, the officials play the part of Providence in such cases.

⁴⁷ *Oct.* 5.

⁴⁸ *Oct.* 10.

⁴⁹ *Oct.* 32, translation by R.E. Wallis (1880).

purify and strengthen the philosopher/the Christian. A version of this idea is presented by Minucius Felix in *Octavius*:

How beautiful is the spectacle to God when a Christian does battle with pain; when he is drawn up against threats, and punishments, and tortures; when, mocking the noise of death, he treads underfoot the horror of the executioner [...].⁵⁰

Confronted with pain and misfortune, the Christian in the era of martyrdom and the non-Christian philosopher give surprisingly similar answers. They ‘despise’ death and pain, we are told. Seneca even glorifies suicide, something that Minucius Felix does not. Suicide and Providence can be combined, in Seneca’s view, since the latter may direct a person to commit an act of self-destruction. Broadly speaking, both thinkers interpret Providence from their own ideological perspectives, and that causes a substantial difference between them. The differences in world views make the following quotation from the *Letter to Diognetus* altogether unacceptable to the non-Christian participant:

The Almighty and all-creating and invisible God himself founded (among men) the truth from heaven [...] not, as one might suppose, by sending some minister to men, or an angel, or ruler [...] but the very artificer and Creator of the universe himself, by whom he made the heavens [...] As a king sending his son, he sent him as King, he sent him as God, he sent him as Man to men.⁵¹

The intervention by the Son invites humans to believe that God is our τροφεύς,⁵² our nourisher, our giver of food, our Provider. The Incarnation is, then, the zenith of culmination for Providence: the Creator sends his Son to take care of the humans.⁵³ Sending sun and rain on the fields is of course important and that is what Providence is often said to be doing, but sending the Creator himself to the aid of man is incomparably more important. So, why do the apologists usually remain silent about Incarnation, about Jesus Christ? And why, on the contrary, does the *Letter to Diognetus* speak quite openly about him? A theory, as yet unproven, could go as follows: the *Letter to Diognetus* represents, chronologically, a more advanced stage of evangelization than the apologetic literature in general. Diognetus, the recipient, had already heard the basics. He had already announced his very great interest in hearing more about the doctrines of Christianity, and about the love which the Christians had towards each other.⁵⁴ This was not the case when Paul spoke to the members of the Areopagus. This was not the case when Justin wrote to the emperor and the Senate. Thus, the theory goes as follows: before the early Christians could present the Son of God, they regarded it advisable to present God, the Father. “First of all, learn to know the Father.”⁵⁵ Therefore, the varying proportions observed between the articles of faith as presented in the early creeds seems to be adapted to needs of the catechumens and believers, whereas the apologists address an altogether different audience.

⁵⁰ *Oct.* 37.

⁵¹ *Diogn.* 7.2–3.

⁵² *Diogn.* 9.6.

⁵³ This view becomes dominant in the next few centuries; see Prestige 1959, 67.

⁵⁴ *Diogn.* 1.

⁵⁵ *Diogn.* 10.1.

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