

# **Justin Martyr and His Contribution to Christian Theology**

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## **Introduction**

Justin martyr is a figure of perennial fascination in the history of emergent Christianity. He is the first Christian to make a serious attempt to determine the relations between Christianity and philosophy, between faith and reason. Chadwick opined that no second-century source is more informative about the way in which the first encounters between the Church and educated society looked to a thoughtful Christian.<sup>1</sup> At the same time his extant writings, which are the most voluminous in extent and substance that any Christian up to his time had hitherto written, provide a mass of information about the internal situation of the Church independently of its reaction to external pressures and pagan attacks.

It is noted that several individuals have contributed to the growth of Christianity among which Justin Martyr is included. Justin was born in the Roman City of Flavia Neapolis (Ancient Shechem in Samaria). As a matter of fact he was raised by pagan parents, and he sought to find meaning in life philosophies of his day which conversely brought series of disappointments to him. Justin was known for his brevity when he was challenged in Rome and obliged to denounce his faith and make sacrifice to the gods. Justin said, “no one who is rightly minded turns from true belief to false.” This is a

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Chadwick, *Justin Martyr's Defence of Christianity* (Oxford: University Press, 1999), 48.

major force to reckon with until date when a catalogue of generals in Christian faith is compiled.<sup>2</sup>

This laconic paper looks into his background prior his affinity with Christian faith and his contributions to Christian theology.

### **The Man Justin Martyr**

Justin who lived between approximately AD 100–165 was a Christian teacher, writer, and ultimately a martyr. He was a native of Samaria (as earlier said) who moved to Ephesus to study philosophy of history in his search for truth. Justin was impressed with the character of Christians who were martyred for their faith. One day while walking and thinking, he met an old man who challenged his thinking and shared the gospel with him. Justin became a believer.<sup>3</sup>

His first teacher was a Stoic who “knew nothing of God and did not even think knowledge of him to be necessary.” There followed a Peripatetic (itinerant philosopher), who seemed most interested in getting his fees. Then came a Pythagorean, but his required course of music, astronomy, and geometry seemed far too slow. Finally, Platonism, though intellectually demanding, proved unfulfilling for Justin's hungry heart.

At last, about A.D. 130, after a conversation with an old man, his life was transformed:

A fire was suddenly kindled in my soul. I fell in love with the prophets and these men who had loved Christ; I reflected on all their words and found that this philosophy alone was true and profitable. That

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<sup>2</sup>

<https://www.christiantoday.com/history/people/evangelistapologists/justin-martyr.html> accessed on 02/09/2022.

<sup>3</sup> Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2009), 8-9.

is how and why I became a philosopher. And I wish that everyone felt the same way that I do.<sup>4</sup>

### **Justin's Life Summary**

A pagan reared in a Jewish environment, Justin studied Stoic, Platonic, and other pagan philosophies and then became a Christian in 132, possibly at Ephesus, near modern Selcuk, Turkey. Soon after 135 he began wandering from place to place, proclaiming his newfound Christian philosophy in the hope of converting educated pagans to it. He spent a considerable time in Rome. Some years later, after debating with the cynic Crescens, Justin was denounced to the Roman prefect as subversive and condemned to death with six companions. Authentic records of his martyrdom, by beheading, survive.

Justin writes with a sunny open-heartedness and innocent optimism that is engagingly attractive, even when it leads him into naivety. Nothing could be less haunted than Justin's mind and conscience. A thoughtful Christian of A.D. 150 contemplating the tiny size of his community and the magnitude of the forces entrenched against its revolutionary program could not fail to conclude that by any natural criterion of judgement the prospects for the Church were less than rosy.

Justin remains cheerfully extrovert, confident that Christianity is the divinely planned way and will therefore win. He is the first exponent of the now familiar notion that the Christian apologist has one task above all else, namely to present accurate information about his faith. If Christianity is true, it has nothing to fear from scrutiny.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation*, 10.

The apologist must never descend to ingenious sophistries to win an argument and must speak without fear or favour as one who has nothing to hide. The rational faculty with which all men have been endowed by God is a providential instrument for arriving at the truth. Fair-minded argument will win with fair-minded readers. The only enemies Christianity has to fear are ignorance of what it is and the prejudice that prevents men from taking pains to dispel their ignorance.

It is readily comprehensible that Justin should hold this view when we remember how much ignorance and prejudice surrounded the second-century Church. In Justin's time a wide credit was still enjoyed by the vulgar charges that at nocturnal rites the Christians indulged in orgies of incest and cannibalism.<sup>6</sup> The evidence of Pliny's report to Trajan shows that belief in the substantial truth of these stories was far from being confined to the uneducated mob. Pliny was astonished to discover from the witnesses whom he tortured that no secret vices were being practiced and that the "superstition" was not accompanied by any moral turpitude other than a contumacious refusal to obey Pliny's orders.

As late as the middle of the third century, by which time Christian beliefs had become a matter of virtually universal public knowledge, Origen tells us that sometimes he had met good people who thought that there could be no smoke without fire and would not even say "Good morning" to a member of the infamous Christian society.<sup>7</sup> When at the end of his First Apology Justin describes baptism and the Eucharist there is a clearly implied thesis that, contrary to the natural expectations of his pagan readers, these rites are not black magic, and indeed could hardly be more innocuous and morally improving. The false charges of unmentionable vice provided a justification both for the mob violence and the

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<sup>6</sup> Henry Chadwick, *Justin Martyr's Defence Of Christianity*, 8.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

official attitude of the persecuting government.<sup>8</sup> Justin comments drily that of some of the Gnostic sects the charges happen to be true, but they are left unmolested.<sup>9</sup> The other main ground for the persecutions was the “atheism” of the Christians, and to this charge Justin replies that the Church rejects images and the superstitions of pagan cult which are a worship of malevolent spirits, but they highly venerate the supreme God, his first-born Son the Logos, the head of a host of good angels, and the Holy Spirit who is in the third place.<sup>10</sup>

Justin has no great difficulty in meeting the common accusations of vice and atheism. They arise from incomprehension and misinformation. But there are also pagan objections that are not so quickly brushed off since they presuppose a measure of true information and insight. The first serious nettle which Justin grasps in the very first chapters of his **First Apology** is the objection that Christians give no reasons and demand blind faith. Justin retorts that faith is not arbitrary prejudice, but an openness, an attitude of readiness to listen and to obey which is strikingly absent from the usual pagan attitude to Christianity which is highly prejudiced against fair-minded investigation.

So far from being arbitrary and irrational, Justin's argument for the supernatural character of Christianity may be labeled as altogether too rationalistic since he depends greatly on the argument from the fulfillment of prophecy in the events of the gospel story. That is to say that the evidence of the supernatural is seen in terms of breaks in the expected natural order.

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<sup>8</sup> A. N. Sherwin-White, *Past and Present*, xxvii (April 1964), 28-33.

<sup>9</sup> Henry Chadwick, *Justin Martyr's Defence Of Christianity*, 9.

<sup>10</sup> Henry Chadwick, *Justin Martyr's Defence Of Christianity*, 11.

## **Justin Martyr's Contribution to Christian Theology**

Justin viewed Christianity through the lens of philosophy. He saw Christianity as philosophy corrected and perfected—the true philosophy. He moved to Rome where he became a teacher and writer. As was the custom of the day, and since public preaching had become dangerous, Justin held private lectures for those who were interested in learning of the faith. He is known today for his writings. There are three writings that are attributed to him, although many scholars doubt the authenticity of one of them particularly the second Apologies.

Of the works bearing Justin's authorship and still deemed genuine are two Apologies and the Dialogue with Trypho. To begin with, Justin Martyr's Dialogue with Trypho is a discussion with a Jew regarding the superiority of Christ and Christianity. Trypho presents objections, and Justin answers them. (Some identify Trypho as a historical rabbi, and others believe that Trypho is a fictional character, and that Justin simply used the dialogue as a literary device.) Trypho objects that Christians worship a man. Justin demonstrates that the Jewish Scriptures speak of Christ. Justin defends the Incarnation and presents the idea that the Church is True People of God and that the Old Covenant is passing away. In his Dialogue Justin gives us valuable insight into the way early Christians interpreted the Old Testament.

Now Justin Martyr's First Apologies (or simply Apologies) is addressed to the Roman Emperor Antonius Pius. It presents Christian truth within the context of current Greek thought. Justin emphasizes that Jesus is the *logos* incarnate (John 1:1), since *logos* was a commonly understood Greek philosophical concept. Justin believed that any person who lived in accordance with the *logos* was a Christian whether that person knew it or not. Socrates was thus a "Christian" before Christ, in much the same way that Abraham was. This Apologies was provoked by persecution of Christians and

attempted to clear away popular misconceptions about Christianity.

Justin's Second Apology was written soon after Marcus Aurelius became emperor in 161.<sup>11</sup> In these writings, Justin tried to show that the Christian faith alone was truly rational. He taught that the Logos (Word) became incarnate to teach humanity truth and to redeem people from the power of the demons.

From Justin Martyr's writings we get early descriptions of Christian worship services and the Eucharist. We see that the Jewish trappings of Christianity were falling away. We also see that Justin opposed the early heresies of Gnosticism, Docetism, and Marcionism.

This apology has gained the most attention for modern readers because in it Justin records detailed descriptions of early Christian worship (to show unbelievers that Christianity was not subversive). The most famous passage is this:<sup>12</sup>

On the day called Sunday there is a gathering together in the same place of all who live in a given city or rural district. The memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits. Then when the reader ceases, the president in a discourse admonishes and urges the imitation of these good things. Next we all rise together and send up prayers.

When we cease from our prayer, bread is presented and wine and water. The president in the same manner sends up prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people sing out their assent, saying the 'Amen.' A distribution and participation of the elements for which thanks have

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<sup>11</sup> Henry Chadwick, *Justin Martyr's Defence Of Christianity*, 14.

<sup>12</sup> Henry Chadwick, *Justin Martyr's Defence of Christianity*, 12.

been given is made to each person, and to those who are not present they are sent by the deacons.

Those who have means and are willing, each according to his own choice, gives what he wills, and what is collected is deposited with the president. He provides for the orphans and widows, those who are in need on account of sickness or some other cause, those who are in bonds, strangers who are sojourning, and in a word he becomes the protector of all who are in need.

Justin often points forward to the political theory of the Christian empire. He thinks it very wrong of the State to raise money by a tax on prostitution,<sup>13</sup> and thereby anticipates the conception of the Church as the conscience of the State. Although he deplores the persecution of the Church, he makes no plea for religious toleration as a fundamental principle, and even expresses the hope that the State will turn its unpleasant attentions upon the heretical sects.<sup>14</sup> Already for Justin the destinies of Church and empire are bound up in the providence of God. It was, he believes, part of the providential plan that Rome should govern Judaea at the time of the incarnation,<sup>15</sup> and that in A.D. 70 Jerusalem should be sacked by the legions as the instruments of divine wrath for the murder of the Messiah and as a drastic intervention to stop the Old Testament sacrifices which the new dispensation had superseded.<sup>16</sup>

Justin's distinctive contribution to Christian theology is his conception of a divine plan in history, a process of salvation structured by God, wherein the various historical epochs have been integrated into an organic unity directed toward a

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<sup>13</sup> M. M. Sagnard, *Clement of Alexandria* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 87.

<sup>14</sup> Henry Chadwick, *Justin Martyr's Defence of Christianity*, 12.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> P. Prigent, *Old Testament Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academy, 2008), 81.



supernatural end; the Old Testament and Greek philosophy met to form the single stream of Christianity.<sup>17</sup>

Justin's concrete description of the sacramental celebrations of baptism and the Eucharist remains a principal source for the history of the primitive church. Justin serves, moreover, as a crucial witness to the status of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century New Testament corpus, mentioning the first three Gospels and quoting and paraphrasing the letters of Paul and 1 Peter; he was the first known writer to quote from the Acts of the Apostles.

## **Conclusion**

It is unfortunate and mind blowing that in 165, Justin and some of his followers were arrested for their faith. In answer to threats of death, Justin is reported to have said, "If we are punished for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ, we hope to be saved." In any case, Justin stood the ground in regard to what he believed. He and his followers were however beheaded under the reign of Emperor Marcus Aurelius, son of Antonius Pius, and he later became known as Justin Martyr.

Justin defends his fellow Christians against the charges of atheism and hostility to the Roman state; this was his first apology and secondly in his Apology Justin argues that the Christians are being unjustly persecuted by Rome. These are major in Justin's legacy. Justin is a propagandist, writing to defend Christianity from outside attack and addressing himself, at least in the Apologies, to a prospective pagan audience.

Martyrdom is not a new invention in Christian faith; it has been seed for the gospel right from the early days of

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.Britannica.com/biography/Saint-Justin-Martyr> Accessed on 02/09/2022.

Christianity as noted by Fatokun.<sup>18</sup> The researchers agree with Tertullian who averred that “the blood of the Martyr is the seed of the church” which was properly put by Souter this way “we spring in greater numbers the more we are mown down by you; the blood of Christians is a seed of a new life.”<sup>19</sup> Justin left an indelible mark in Christian theology and such a man remains connoisseur fellow that cannot but be studied today.

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<sup>18</sup> Samson A. Fatokun, *Church in the Apostolic Age* (Ibadan: Erodise Publications, 2006), 24.

<sup>19</sup> Alex Souter, *Septimi Florentis Tertulliani Apologeticus, The Text of Oehler* translated by John E.B. Mayor (Cambridge: University Press, 1917), NP.