

Stoicism And Christianity

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Though antiquity generally rejected anything like a developmental or evolutionary view of the universe, we moderns are in the full swing of such an interpretation. The result is that we see evolution where there is none at all or at most very little. In every department we trace the growth and unawares we see causal nexus between a phenomenon and antecedent movements. So, too, Christianity is linked up with the Graeco-Roman world in such a way that the former has evolved out of the latter. Christianity is the synthetic development of various movements of thought and life current at its inception. Repeatedly he who runs may read that Christianity is really nothing more than what was already present in the life of the Hellenistic Age. Stoicism especially is chosen as such a preparatory movement.

It is the purpose of this paper to investigate the correctness of this view. It must be clear to everyone that the proper procedure is to take the documents of the New Testament as they stand and thus determine the real character of Christianity. Regardless of whether we are in accord with the teaching of these documents, we cannot take a modern view of Christianity and compare it with Stoicism, when we are about to make an investigation of the genetic relationship between the two. This discussion cannot enter into many details. The aim here is to take up just three concepts and discuss them. They are God, Man, Providence. The whole field of ethics is left for later discussion.

The statement is often made that there is harmony between Stoicism and Christianity because both held to the same kind of

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conception of God. Both are monotheistic, it is said. The basis for this is that both believed in some final, ultimate, absolute Being underlying all things and present in all things. So far the position seems entirely tenable. However, the Christian monotheistic conception of the New Testament is very clear in its implications and designations of the Being of God. One should, of course, not lose sight of the fact that the New Testament has a Hebrew as well as a Graeco-Roman background. The God-concept in the New Testament is clearly opposed to the general trend of Greek and Roman thought. Specifically, too, the views of Stoicism and Christianity are by no means identical.

The Hebrew background put definite content into the term God. When a Matthew, Mark, or Paul speaks of God, it is the utterance of a Hebrew soul. I shall call attention to just two points. The Hebrew postulates throughout that God is a person and, furthermore, that He is immaterial. The long course of the history of Israel had emphasized these things. No one of these men could have been schooled in the Old Testament and not teach this. To Jesus and Paul God is Father and not merely the Absolute. The New Testament is replete with this fundamental idea. Was a person manifest in the flesh in Jesus Christ. It was the personality of Jesus that dominated the life of St. Paul.

The Old Testament also emphasized that God is immaterial. Jehovah is the "I am that I am." God connotes to the writer of the New Testament a spiritual Being. Material He is not.

When we compare this with Stoicism, we find a strong contrast. The ultimate substance there lacks personality and spirituality. Repeatedly the Stoics speak of God as the primal substance which is fire. This is why that element will finally also consume all things, and all will return to the original being. The careful reading of Cicero, Seneca, Marcus Aurelius, and Epictetus does not bring one face to face with a living, loving, and just personality as does the reading of the Gospels or of Paul.

Both Christianity and Stoicism agree that there is an ultimate substance. But when the simple question is put as to the character of that substance, the answer is totally different. If monotheism connotes anything in the light of the New Testament, it is that

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God is a spiritual personality. Stoicism has neither an ultimate spirit nor an ultimate personality. For this same fiery substance is everywhere, in man, the material universe, the heavenly bodies. This is the all-pervading divinity. A transcendent God such as Christianity teaches Stoicism does not have. Therefore, the best that can be said for Stoicism is that it is a monistic system and a pantheistic system. Monotheistic it is by no means.

But let us turn to man. "What is man that Thou art mindful of him?" Here again the New Testament writings are completely in accord with the teaching of the Old Testament. Man was created in the image of God. But certainly no writer of the New Testament says that this means identity of being. We are made like Him but not of the same substance with Him. Man remains man in the New Testament and does not become God, nor is he God.

Turn now to the Stoics, and what do we find? The primal substance is the fiery Logos. This resides in God and man. The two are identical. Man is God, and God is man. Since the Stoic has only an immanent God, it naturally follows that God and man are one. This teaching runs all through the Stoic writings. A few citations will suffice. Seneca says, "Reason is nothing else than a part of the divine spirit immersed in the human body."¹ Again Seneca says,

And why should you not believe that something of divinity exists in one who is a part of God? All this universe that encompasses us is one, and it is God. We are associates of God; we are His members.²

Epictetus expresses himself in the same way. We read:

¹ *Ep.* xlvi, 12.

² *Ep.* xcii.

But if our souls are so bound up with God and joined together with Him as being parts of His being, does not God perceive their every motion as being a motion of that which is his own and of one body with Himself?³

Then there is the oft-quoted passage:

You are a fragment of God; you have within you a part of Him. Why do you not know the source from which you have sprung? Whenever you mix in society, whenever you take physical exercise, whenever you converse, do you not know that you are nourishing God, exercising God?⁴

The utterances of Marcus Aurelius are the same. We read:

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And thou hast forgotten, too, that every man's intelligence is a god and is an efflux of the deity.⁵

One last example I shall give:

And he does live with the gods who constantly shows to them that his own soul is satisfied with that which is assigned to him and that it does all that the daemon wishes, which Zeus hath given to every man for his guardian and guide, a portion of himself. And this is every man's understanding and reason.⁶

These passages are abundantly clear in their teaching. That doctrine of the divinity of man is violently opposed to the teaching of the New Testament. Nowhere do we find anything like it. Often one meets the following passage from Seneca as giving evidence for the identity in thought of Stoicism and Christianity:

God is near you, with you, within you. A holy spirit sits within us as spectator of our evil and our good.⁷

But in view of the God-concept of Stoicism which presents God only as immanent and then, too, impersonal and material, what can such a passage mean? Certainly it cannot be identical with the Pauline teaching of the Holy Spirit. To make it appear identical, the phrase "a holy spirit" is often capitalized. However, the most that such a passage can mean is that the individual has in him a conscience and a will which together with his intelligence must help to direct his course.

The matter discussed above is most important. For the attitude of the Stoics toward the essential character of man determined their ethical views. Because man is what he is, a fragment of the universal, his conduct might be regulated according to that same inner substance. That is the basis of the Stoic maxim, to live in accordance with nature. Nature being the divine, and man being a part of nature, his task is to steer his course according to nature. Look within and without, and the laws of living will be discovered.

³ *Disc.* I, xiv, 6.

⁴ *Disc.* II, viii, 11-12.

⁵ *Med.* xii, 26.

⁶ *Med.* v, 27.

⁷ *Ep.* xli, 1-2.

Comparing that view with the teaching of the New Testament one finds a great abyss between the two. Paul's conception of human nature and that of the Stoics are radically different. For

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the one, human nature is desperately wicked; for the other, it is, divine. Matthew Arnold has put it as follows:

As one passes and repasses from Hellenism to Hebraism, from Plato to St. Paul, one feels inclined to rub one's eyes and ask oneself whether man is indeed a gentle and simple being, showing traces of a noble and divine nature, or an unhappy chained captive, laboring with groanings that cannot be uttered to free himself from the body of this death.

It seems to me that Arnold has stated the case correctly. The essence of the whole Stoic ethic is to live according to nature; the essence of the Christian ethic of the New Testament is to live according to the supernatural. Therefore, whatever apparent agreement there may be in terminology, the fundamental aims and ideal are different.

The last idea of the Stoics, often presented as a forerunner of and identical with Christian teaching, is that of Providence. Interesting it is in this case to note that the New Testament twice only uses the word *πρόνοια*, while the Stoics frequently employ the term. The fact is also that in the two passages, Acts xxiv, 2, and Romans xiii, 14, the word does not have the meaning that we attach to Providence. Yet the New Testament is filled with the idea of Providence, and that, a Providence far richer than that of the Stoics. Specific passages such as Matthew vi, 26-34, and x, 29-31, illustrate the idea. Now just what would one regard as the characteristics of the Christian idea of Providence? It can be described as including three elements. These are (a) that the smallest detail is the object of divine care, (b) that every detail is the object of perfect love on the part of the Father for his children, (c) that the course of events is heading toward a final goal.

The Stoic speaks of Providence but apparently of one that is none too definite nor too gracious. I mean this. The Christian teaching is that everything is perfectly determined and secure with the Father who knows all things and loves his children with a perfect love. Seneca, however, says that the gods "are supreme commanders in the universe, controlling all things by their power and acting as guardians of the human race, even though they are sometimes unmindful of the individual."⁸ Cicero says "The gods care

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for great things but neglect the little."⁹ Epictetus expresses the same sentiment.¹⁰ Now it is interesting to contrast this with the expression that not a hair of one's head shall

⁸ *Ep.* xcv, 50.

⁹ *N. D.* II, 167.

¹⁰ *Disc.* I, xii, 1.

perish.¹¹ In the teaching of the New Testament the individual stands out as of paramount importance. Not merely the general course of things is the object of Providence but even the minutest detail. The Stoic, therefore, must be in an uncertain frame of mind. Is he or is he not the object of loving care?

Furthermore, the effect of the Stoic belief in Providence is undermined or nullified by contrary teachings. Not only is there Providence, but also there is Fate or Chance. The good effect that the belief in Providence had was offset by the belief in Chance or Fate. The contrast between Stoicism and Christianity on this point is absolute. *Fortuna* and *Fatum* appear repeatedly in the Stoic writings. But not once does either word occur in all the New Testament. Providence in the New Testament is real; Providence according to the Stoic may be eclipsed at any moment by Chance. Epictetus says, "Surrender everything to the Deity, to Fortune."¹² Dread fear, therefore, ever hangs over the Stoic. The peace of God that passeth all understanding is the Christian's possession.

The evidence that the Stoic doctrine of Providence is not of the same substance as the Christian should further be evident from its effect. A vague general belief in the control of the universe, which at the same time leaves one in the lurch, cannot serve as a buoy to tried souls. That is why the Stoic so readily made use of the "open door." You can always pull out of the situation that overwhelms you with its evil. But Christian Providence maintains that loving care is behind it all and through it all. That being the case, there is no question of suicide. But the Stoic openly advocated it. Many of the leaders took their own lives. This was because Fortune, Fate, occupied the place of kindly Providence in their lives. Such a possibility the Christian did not admit.

There is one more difference between the Stoic and the Christian conception of Providence. The Stoics, like the ancients generally, held to the cyclic theory of history. All moves on toward the time

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when everything is again reabsorbed into the primal element of fire. After that the universe will again repeat itself just as in a former cycle. It becomes something like the wheel of existence of Indian philosophy. Providence directs things in general toward that consummation. The world goes on toward that end. And then the same thing again. Marcus Aurelius says:

The rational soul wanders round the whole world and through the encompassing void, gazes into infinite time, considers the periodic destructions and rebirths of the universe, and reflects that our posterity will see nothing new and that our ancestors have seen nothing greater than we have seen.¹³

Needless to say the Christian view is not such. Rather does Providence direct things toward an ultimate and final goal that will abide for ever. The consummation is not one in which everything loses its entity, being consumed by fire. The consummation according to the

¹¹ Cf. Luke xxi, 18.

¹² *Disc.* iv, 4, 39.

¹³ *Med.* xi, 1; cf. ix, 28; x, 7.

New Testament documents is one in which that which is of time puts on that which is of eternity. The hope of the Christian is genuine.

Closely linked up with this is the view of immortality. To the question of job, "If a man die, shall he live again?" the answer of the Stoics is uncertain. The answer of Christianity is very positive.¹⁴ The Stoic wavered and halted between two opinions. It was *aut finis aut transitus*. So says Seneca.¹⁵ In his *Consolation to Polybius* he writes, "Why am I wasted for desire of him who is either happy or nonexistent?"¹⁶ The same thought is found in Marcus Aurelius.¹⁷ The Stoics had got no further on this question than Socrates in Plato's *Apology*.¹⁸ Comfort from the certainty of a hereafter the Stoics did not have.

But even if a Stoic did not accept extinction at death, the immortality hoped for was not that of the Christian. An end to the continued existence would some time come. For at the end, at the great conflagration, all would ultimately cease to exist. In his *Consolation* Seneca writes:

Then we also, happy souls, who have been assigned to eternity, when God

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shall see fit to reconstruct the universe, when all things pass, we, too, a little element in a great catastrophe, shall be resolved into our ancient elements.¹⁹

Marcus Aurelius says the same thing.²⁰ Whatever comfort some people may distil out of that thought cannot do away with the fact that for most people it is a fearful thing to contemplate. Certain it is, beyond dispute, that, if Christianity had not offered more than that as a promise of immortality, it never would have conquered much of the ancient world, as it did. The New Testament writings glow with the hope of a blessed immortality.

To conclude, no one should think of denying that Stoicism on the surface contains many excellent teachings. The simple question, however, is whether they agree fundamentally with the doctrines of Christianity. This paper has dealt with some of the basic ideas. At another time an examination will be made more specifically in the field of ethics. Were their teaching of a universal brotherhood and that of Christianity the same, or nearly so?

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Prepared for the Web in June 2006 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

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¹⁴ Cf. John xi, 25 ff., and xiv, 3; Luke xxiii, 43, and xvi, 19-31.

¹⁵ *Ep. lxvi ad finem*; cf. *Ep. xxiv*.

¹⁶ *Cons. Polyb.* ix, 3.

¹⁷ *Med.* v, 33; iv, 21; vii, 32; viii, 25; xi, 3.

¹⁸ *Apol.* 40 f.

¹⁹ *Cons. Polyb., fin.*; cf. *Ep. lxxi*, 16.

²⁰ Cf. *Med.* iv, 14; 21.