

Logic and Early Christianity

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The paper considers the relation of early Christianity to the history of logic, that is, the role of the early Christianity in the development of logic as a discipline. In effect, two questions are raised: First, what was the attitude of the early Christian writers towards logic and dialectics? And second, how does the period and whatever could be found there relate to the subsequent development of logic? The suggested conclusion is that the enmity of early Christians to logic can be explained by the divergent standards of truth: revealed and non-intellectualist nature of its central doctrines, also by the association of logical matters with pagan philosophy. On the other hand the period seems to have laid the grounds for the subsequent rediscovery of internal need for the standardized criterion of truth, and so the resultant establishment of logic as an important discipline, and thus this period is essential for understanding the subsequent flow of the history of logic. Hence the gap in the history lurking between pagan Antiquity and Boethius can reasonably be filled.

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My question, which regards the relationship between logic and early Christianity, is the question of the attitude of early Christian writers to logic broadly understood. The following observations and considerations are presented from the point of view of a philosopher with a general interest in the history of logic, rather than a professional logician or religious scholar. One might also immediately notice that as opposed to most contemporary works in the history of logic that characteristically focus on a well-defined problem or a particular personality, as to provide a rather fine grained analysis and interpretation, my approach is of a very coarse grain. I have a broad question and a speculative answer.

This question may seem rather straightforward. But it also seems to have deserved virtually no attention and is scarcely reflected in the literature. Maybe the answer is obvious, not worthy any effort of consideration at all. The question could also be approached in a rather general manner, it could easily be extended and applied without any specific temporal or historical qualifications, as the question with regard to the relation of logic and religion in most general terms. Without a particular historical context, however, the question loses its specifics and is no longer that interesting.

Thus, to make it more precise, let me reformulate the initial question as the question about the relation of early Christianity to the *history* of logic, that is, the role of the early Christianity in the development of logic as a discipline, so to say. Having done this, we will notice that there is an obvious chronological gap in the available comprehensive accounts of the history of logic. Be it *The Development of Logic* (1962) by Martha and William Kneales, or *A History of Logic* (1961) by Bochenski, or even the much earlier, and lately criticized, monumental opus *Geschichte der Logik im Abendlande* (1855-1870) by Carl Prantl. Well, Prantl seems to have worked under the spell of Kant's claim that no significant advances in logic have been made since Aristotle's invention of the discipline.

The most simplified version of the history of logic, given in one sentence, is well known. It only refers to Aristotle and Frege as the only two indeed relevant points in the entire history of the field. However, even the more detailed accounts of the history of logic seem to pause at the end of antiquity, only to resume a few centuries later in the texts of Boethius, with a possible exception of a few authors, like Marius Victorinus or Martianus Capella before him. As John Marenbon notes in his chapter on the Latin Tradition of Logic to 1100 in the relevant volume of the massive *Handbook of the History of Logic*, this tradition "had no great logicians, but only influential ones, like Boethius, and outstanding philosophers, like Eriugena and Anselm, who were interested in logic" (Marenbon 2008, 1).

One could say that this is all right, as the period in question in fact had not been generous with regard to the formal or theoretical innovations in logic, and the history of logic is usually understood as the history of formal logic in precisely those more specific terms. But, e.g. Marenbon, reflecting this lack of original logical research or output over a rather extensive period of time – and he talks not only about the Early Christianity, but about the entire first millennium – explicitly calls for what he terms "*a social history* of medieval logic, a type of study that has never until now been envisaged, let alone attempted" (Marenbon 2008, 2), on account of lacking formal material to work on. And still, the gap remains, implying the futility

of the period, the time that had passed in vain. Wasted centuries. That would well fit the cliché of the Dark Ages.

Nevertheless, this historiographical gap immediately appears to invite some explanation, especially given the subsequent development of the relationship between logic and Christianity, as is well known, resulting in the placement of logic among the central disciplines of the standard curriculum, and producing the Scholastic tradition, which is arguably one of the great creative periods in the entire history of logic (Marenbon 2008, 1).

So, given the state of recognized logical historiography, initial question now seems to be readily split into two. First, were the issues of logic absent from the agenda of the early Christian writers? And second, how does the period and whatever could be found there relate to the subsequent development of logic.

We have written testimonies, those fragmentary pieces, some external and some internal with regard to Christianity. Mostly from early fathers of the church, like Clement, Origne, Arnobius, Lactantius, both Gregories, Hippolytus, Tertulian, and certain heretics like Marcion or Apelles. The pieces that are, one could say, purple with mentions of logic and dialectics. Mostly in quite unsophisticated terms, but anyway. It was not the case that logic has been out of the agenda completely.

Of the most prominent oft quoted external sources we have Galen, who states that some author who “is content with a mere assertion” without an argument, leaves the “impression that the reader, just as if he had entered the school of Moses or of Christ, was going to hear undemonstrated laws” (*On the Difference of Pulses*, quoted in Karamanolis 2013, 117). The comparison is also used elsewhere: “Were I thinking of those who teach pupils in the manner of the followers of Moses and Christ, ordering them to accept everything on trust, I should not have given you a definition” (*Against the First Unmoved Mover*, quoted in Karamanolis 2013, 117).

Although Galen is the most profound example, similar accusation for Christians accepting their doctrines or beliefs without any proof, can be found in Celsus, Lucian and Porphyry. Every pagan opponent of Christianity repeated the accusation, contrasting proof with trust. On the other hand, Galen also berates his pagan contemporaries for accepting on trust the doctrines of a Master or a School.

Here’s a quote from Lactantius, the pupil of Arnobius, 3rd century apologist, who became advisor for the first Christian Roman Emperor Constantine the Great. Having discussed metaphysics and ethics, he adds: “There remains that third part of philosophy which they call logic in which the whole of dialectics and the entire method of speaking is contained. Divine instruction does not desire this because wisdom is not in the

tongue but in the heart and it is not concerned with what sort of speech to use. For things, not words are sought. And we are discussing not grammar, not oratory, the knowledge of how it is fitting to speak, but we are concerned with wisdom whose doctrine rests in how it is necessary to live. But if that necessary plan is not physics, nor this logic either, because they cannot make one happy, it remains that the whole strength of philosophy is contained in ethics alone" (The Divine Institutes, Bk III, Ch 13).

So, if logic is a tool or instrument (as for Aristotle, or at least for Alexander of Aphrodisias), then it may be regarded useless for Christians. Not much of an instrumental value. Another quote from Gregory of Nyssa: "As for confirming our doctrines by way of the dialectical art, through syllogism and analytical science, we abjure that form of discourse as rotten and suspect with regard to the proof of the truth" (quoted in Barnes 2011, 153).

As Frederick Copleston writes, "since on the one hand pagan philosophers were inclined to attack the Church and her doctrine, while on the other hand Christian apologists and theologians were inclined to borrow the weapons of their adversaries when they thought that these weapons could serve their purpose, it is only to be expected that the Christian writers should show a divergence of attitude in regard to ancient philosophy, according as they chose to regard it as a foe and rival of Christianity, or as a useful arsenal and store-house or even as a providential preparation for Christianity" (Copleston 1950, 15). It seems that the Christians were in many cases willing to refuse the use of logic, and that the general observations of Copleston can be successfully applied here too.

Jonathan Barnes, discussing the early Christian attitudes towards logic, claims that it was "a certain address and style", "a dry and abstract style in which propositions are set down with no attention to literary elegance; it is a spare and abrupt style, in which nothing is decked in rhetorical flipper; it is a pedantic style, in which everything pertinent to the argument and nothing superfluous is laid out as precisely and as plainly as possible. In short, it is a logical style – a style adopted in antiquity by the Stoic masters and affected today by certain logically minded philosophers". Barnes goes on: "I think that it was this common style, as much as anything of a more strictly logical nature, which roused the ire of the orthodox" (Barnes 2012, 16).

The argument from style offered by Barnes seems adequate to account for the lack of interest on behalf of the early Christian writers in specific logical issues, their attitude of indifference, so to say, adiaphoric status of logic. But it seems hardly sufficient to explain the pronounced, almost severe, expression of enmity, openly unfriendly disposition towards logic,

evidently present in most fragments on logic, dialectic or syllogistic, explicitly relating them to heresy. The argument from style, I believe, in the light of these fragments, leaves one wanting for more. We thus need another argument. And that takes us to the notion of truth. In his *Stromata*, Clement of Alexandria argues that finding the truth cannot be carried out successfully, unless one receives the rule of truth from the truth itself” (quoted in Karamanolis 2013, 122). Clement thus identifies truth with the truth of the Church.

It appears, that the source of the tension between logic and Christianity does not lie in the elements related to the formal or structural standards of the proofs, as much as in the status of the initial premises, in the ultimate grounds for the proofs in question. By now it is almost a platitude that “Christianity came into the world as a revealed religion: it was given to the world by Christ as a doctrine of redemption and salvation and love, not as an abstract and theoretical system, and He sent His apostles to preach, not to occupy professors’ chairs. Christianity was ‘the Way’, a road to God to be trodden in practice, not one more philosophical system added to the systems and schools of antiquity” (Copleston 1950, 13).

However, as note by Andrew Itter, “Clement was also aware that the Logos was a common notion in Greek philosophy and therefore needed to distinguish the logic that was applied to the search for truth, from its use as a sophistic tool where the goal was anything but assimilation to the divine. Sophistry, he believed, is merely human wisdom, only fit for worldly enterprises and caprices where the search for truth no longer played any part. His respect for logic and dialectic made him determined that they be employed in the attainment of divine wisdom and knowledge rather than for worldly gain” (Itter 2009, 82).

Although, “logic, when abused and not appropriately directed towards discovering the truth of things, can simply become a tool for pedantry”, the important part is that “ultimately there must be a canon or criterion for truth to which one can appeal in order to find the basis of certainty” (Itter 2009, 87). What we witness a gradual shift in perception of logic. This change of the attitude might be accounted, I suggest, by the change in the political status of Christianity from the 4th century onwards, also by the settlement of the canon of the scriptures, and the increasing maturity of the doctrine. Hence the transition from the more radical opposition in the early writers, as Tertullian, to the more constructive approach of Clement of Alexandria, not to mention the later Augustine or Boethius. To quote Copleston one last time: “As Christianity made fast its roots and grew, it aroused the suspicion and hostility, not merely of the Jews and the political authorities, but also of pagan intellectuals and writers. Some of the

attacks levelled against Christianity were due simply to ignorance, credulous suspicion, fear of what was unknown, misrepresentation; but other attacks were delivered on the theoretical plane, on philosophical grounds, and these attacks had to be met. This meant that philosophical as well as theological arguments had to be used" (Copleston 1950, 13).

To provide some generalizations and conclusions, we cannot talk about any one personality having exerted a deciding influence on the early stage of relations between Christianity and logic. But this should not imply that those early centuries were insignificant to the subsequent developments of logic as the discipline. First of all, it seems that the diverse repertoire of available positions with regard to the relation has been established. Second, accumulation of debatable material "internal" to Christianity (as opposed to external criticism), has reached the critical amount to work on in which the need for standards for resolving disagreements. And that leads to the third, it allows the early Christians to reinvent and redefine logic as a useful tool, sufficiently formal as to be neutral with regard to the issues of the doctrine.

In this brief exposition, I thus hope to have tentatively answered the two parts of the initial question regarding the relationship of the history of logic with the early Christianity. Although much more thorough and meticulous account is wanted, it seems that while on the one hand, the enmity of early Christians to logic can be explained by the divergent standards of truth: revealed and non-intellectualist nature of its central doctrines, also by the association of logical matters with pagan philosophy. On the other hand the period seems to have laid the grounds for the subsequent rediscovery of internal need for the standardized criterion of truth, and so the resultant establishment of logic as an important discipline, and thus this period is essential for understanding the subsequent flow of the history of logic. Hence the gap in the history lurking between pagan Antiquity and Boethius can reasonably be filled.

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