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Clement of Alexandria's Methodological Framework

and its Relation to the Biblical Virtues
in Light of Concepts of Faith, Knowledge, and *Gnosis*

Philosophy's relation to theology has always been a topic of much debate. From the time of the Pre-Socratics to our current age, philosophers and theologians alike have contested the degree to which these two methodologically similar disciplines are related. In the tract of this long lineage of discussion, Titus Flavius Clemens, better known as Clement of Alexandria, has made a significant contribution. His conception of the relationship between philosophy and theology as taking different paths to a single conception of truth opens the door for a host of theological issues that conflict with some of the dogmatics and doctrines of the Church. More importantly, Clement's attempt to incorporate philosophical thought as an aggrandizing principle in relation to the Biblical virtues resulted in a set of axiomatic statements and a methodological framework that is inexorably rooted in an anti-ecumenical paradigm, while simultaneously rooting itself in a solely faith-based perspective of Christianity that lays emphasis on the individual's plight to act upon an ever-increasing understanding of God's call in this world for each of us.

Principles of Clement's Theology

Clement of Alexandria was born c. A.D. 150 to pagan parents. We know very little about the life of Clement beyond this. We know he had a thirst for knowledge and this led to him doing a great deal of traveling to places like Italy, Palestine and Syria, while searching for a satisfactory instructor. Eventually he met Pantænus at Alexandria and began to study there. Here he was ordained a presbyter and gave regular orations and instruction on the Christian faith c. 190.

Clement probably succeeded Pantænus c. 200 as head of the Catechetical

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school; however, he soon left Alexandria in 202 when persecution broke out under Septimius Severus. The last years of Clement's life are virtually unknown to us, although we can say he probably spent time in Cappadocia and Antioch and died somewhere between 211 and 216.

In light of the time of his writing and scholarly work that we possess, Clement is often referred to as the first Christian scholar. This is in great part owing to the era of history in which he wrote. Clement falls after the works of the Greek apologists but before many of the other theologians and scholars who later would begin to sprout up. His familiarity with both Scripture and the writings of pagan authors lent him acumen into the many different traditions of the time and added a deep erudition to his writings.

This girth of knowledge relating to pagan authors might be what left Clement with such an affinity for philosophy. In light of this, it is only logical that Clement propounded a theology that is tainted in its relationship to his concept of a single truth. In a sense, Clement's theology, though not as systematic as the later philosophers and theologians, is centralized around two precepts that relate to all the pieces of his theology and originate from his singular conception of truth: "Knowledge is to be believed. Faith is to be known."¹

Knowledge and Wisdom

It is with the first of these claims, "knowledge is to be believed," that we will first concern ourselves with. In his conception of truth, Clement believed that all philosophers and theologians alike are struggling toward a common, singular truth. Under such an auspicious conception, Clement was able to preserve the notion that both philosophy and theology know truth by a direct action of God.

Though some have proposed that Clement also claimed truth in philosophy because it took its best ideas from the Hebrews, this claim is both unsubstantiated and probably unwarranted. His Book V of the *Protrepticos* seems to overtly deny any claim to Greek philosophy borrowing from Hebraic culture. Judging from his familiarity with the lineage of conceptual precepts in the Pre-Socratics, it would have been evident to Clement that Greek thought was the result of a traceable lineage progressing from one philosopher to the next, originating in an independent Greek tradition.

This concept — that Clement claimed truth through direct divine action in philosophy — is further supported by the texts that Clement himself wrote. In fact, in his *Exhortation to the Greeks*, Clement makes comment of Plato in a way that lends his work to be unmistakably the product of divine action:

"For there is a certain divine effluence instilled into all persons without exception, but especially into those who spend their lives in thought; wherefore they admit, even though against their will, that God is One, unbegotten and indestructible, and that somewhere on high in the outermost spaces of the heavens, in God's own private watch-tower, God truly exists forever."²

¹ GONZÁLEZ Justo L., *A History of Christian Thought: From the Beginnings to the Council of Chalcedon*. Nashville, 1987. 194.

² GONZÁLEZ, 192.

Wisdom and Hermeneutics

It is important to remember that despite Clement's acknowledgment of truth being possessed in philosophy, he placed a high premium on the Scriptures. For Clement, the Scriptures were of ineffable value. They are the true word of God that is the most clear and austere construction of his divine action amongst us. As he so clearly stated, the Scriptures are "bare of embellishment, of outward beauty of language, of idle talk and flattery."³

Nonetheless, Clement was a definite supporter of the allegorical interpretation of Scripture. As such, any passage of Scripture has both a primary or literal meaning and a more profound secondary or spiritual meaning. "Christian teaching puts truth in simple form so that the humblest may at once understand as much of it as is necessary to ensure one's salvation."⁴

In Clement's hermeneutic, however, he distinguished two very important principles that must be in constant consideration during the Biblical exegesis involved in the discernment of spiritual meaning. The first is that any allegorical interpretation of the Scriptures must not disregard the primary or literal meaning of the text being considered (so long as that primary meaning does not deny known facts of God's character). The second principle is that any text being considered must be interpreted from the perspective of the rest of the Scriptures.

It is only fitting, in light of Clement's spectrum of attainable knowledge through many media and his methodology of Scriptural exegesis and hermeneutics, that Clement would believe there exists a 'true gnosis' that is not attainable except through constant search for the truth. This *gnosis* is both intellectual and ethical in character and is achieved through an amalgamation of the virtues gained from the various methodologies by which a person can come to understand God in greater depth.

The intellectual character of this *gnosis* is stated as an acknowledgement that "every kind of pre-eminence seems honourable in proportion to its worth." The ethical might be better termed the "actual" or "effective"; the side of this *gnosis* is described as one who "pays service to God by one's constant self-discipline and by cherishing that which is divine in oneself in the way of unremitting charity."⁵ For Clement, it was important to note that the Gnostic is the only true lover of God in the most profound sense.

Acting on Reasoned Principles

In many ways, perhaps the best method for understanding Clement's concept of the Gnostic is not as one would understand the term from the earlier perspective of Gnosticism, but as a person who has chosen to enact those values which one has come to know through the reason of philosophy and allegorical exegesis of the Scriptures. In this way, Clement's concept of the Gnostic is merely one who acts on reasoned principles.

Perhaps such an interpretation is too sympathetic to Clement's position; however, it does seem to have some validity. Such a conception accounts for some of his more philosophic positions that seem contrary to Scripture, such as the Gnostic

3 CLEMENT of Alexandria, *The Exhortation to the Greeks* (tr. Buttersworth G. W.). Cambridge, 1960. 173.

4 CLEMENT of Alexandria, *The Exhortation to the Greeks*. In Clement of Alexandria (tr. Buttersworth G. W.). Cambridge, 1960. 173.

5 CLEMENT of Alexandria, *On Spiritual Perfection*. In BAILLIE John – McNeill John T. – VAN DUSEN Henry P. (eds.), *The Library of Christian Classics: Alexandrian Christianity*. Philadelphia, 1954. 94.

putting oneself before others and the use of a form of virtues as ethics in order to describe the actions of the Gnostic.

This use of virtues as a means to ethics is interesting in its distinctness from Greek philosophy, which saw the attainment of virtue as a form of ethic. Such a conception of the relationship between action and intellect makes Clement's 'true gnosis' a part of his methodological framework (as the connective tissue between thought and its implement into ethical action) rather than an aspect of his theological perspective.

This slight but notable distinction is identified in passages such as, "Prudence and justice he employs for the acquisition of wisdom, and humanity not only in enduring misfortunes, but also in controlling pleasure and desire and pain and anger, and generally in withstanding all that sways the soul either by force or guile."⁶

It is in light of these three principles (acknowledgement of the truth in philosophy, Biblical hermeneutic, and the concept of a 'true gnosis') that we can understand Clement's methodological framework for a complete theology. It is upon these methodological principles that he built the rest of his more systematic concept of theology.⁷

Redefining Faith and Knowledge

The reliance of Clement's theology as system upon his methodological framework is nowhere clearer than in his conceptions of soteriology and anthropology. His concept of human as developmental (similar to Irenæus) was directly informed by his faith in a single truth. The statement "knowledge is to be believed" can be a reference to the ever-striving nature of humankind to become something better than oneself; that is to say, to become more like God.

In his soteriology, Clement identified four basic principles: divine providence is absolutely supreme and beneficent; God's plan of salvation is humanitarian, not individualistic, in outlook; God's power persuades freedom; and divine punishment is purifying. Certainly, such a concept of the salvation of human can come only from an allegorical interpretation of Scripture. It is also clearly informed (insofar as this soteriological concept is influenced by a persuaded freedom) by the 'true gnosis' that calls us as Christians to strive toward the truth of God.

Finally, Clement's use of divine punishment as purification was a direct result of the intrinsically good nature of God that we come to know through both the Scriptures and reason. Clement attempts throughout his work not to emphasize the use of reason or Scripture as dialectic, but rather he views them as associated tools for advancement. For him, both are necessary to achieving the 'true gnosis.'

As such, these two principles are complementary tools that help the Christian in different ways; this necessarily means that to compare the two and make an attempt to evaluate which is more useful is null and void, since both are needed for different reasons. In light of this, it is clear how the methodological framework influences the actual precepts and constructs of the elements in his systematic or thematic theology.

6 CLEMENT of Alexandria, *On Spiritual Perfection*. In BAILLIE John – MCNEILL John T. – VAN DUSEN Henry P. (eds.), *The Library of Christian Classics: Alexandrian Christianity*. Philadelphia, 1954. 93–165.; CROSS F. L., *The Early Christian Fathers*. London, 1960. 103.

7 Some of his work, however, is a formidable exception to this systematic end. This observation is made in reference to the intentional ordering of his *Exhortation to the Greeks* and the *Instructor* in contra to the fundamental unsystematic structure of the *Stromata*. The latter is probably only a set of notes that would have been used to write a more ordered and systematic rendering of the materials.

This methodological framework is the most original and thought-provoking aspect of Clement's concept of theology. For him, the base of all theological knowledge was in an accepted position of faith. This was a radical shift from what to past generations of theologians was simply an acknowledged criterion of truth and knowing.

However, it was also an even more radical diatribe against the theology of Anselm and Thomas Aquinas that would come later. Clement's own writings show that to prove the existence of God or truth by scientific method is not possible; rather we must accept the existence of God or this fundamental truth by faith. As he clearly stated:

"Again, mere persuasive arguments are too superficial in their nature to establish the truth on scientific grounds, but Greek philosophy does, as it were, provide for the soul the preliminary cleansing and training required for the reception of the faith, on which foundation the truth builds up the edifice of knowledge."⁸

Faith is to be Known

Since such a premium is placed on faith in the roots of Clement's theology, it is more understandable how he could affirm the statement "knowledge is to be believed; faith is to be known." For Clement, his theology grounded itself in the fundamental concepts of faith as "knowledge" of those things that cannot be known by the rational intellect.

His statement on belief in knowledge was an effort to illustrate that the ideals of science and reason are but means to solidifying and justifying faith, though not in its entirety. Furthermore, these seemingly fundamental truths are actually from God and taken in the light of the Scriptures, they inform us of God's character.

Yet Clement knew all this knowledge is underpinned by faith and can only be believed. Interpreted as such (which seems to be a fair rendering in light of his theological positions and methodological framework) Clement's theological conception of faith seems quite similar to that of the existential theologians, or vice versa.

Since Clement stated, "faith is to be known," to use the root "know" in his statement of faith is a bit confusing. It seems to fit within the framework of his theology to state that "known" could be replaced by "hoped for" in the Biblical sense. This hope in faith is, in my conception, a theological formulation of passages from Scripture, such as:

"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible" (Hebrews 11:1-3). As such, Clement was not trying to say that "faith is to be known" in the sense of knowledge as we would consider it, but as assurance from God that is strengthened by our empirical sensation.

Yet, there is an element to this axiomatic statement of Clement that we must address. As of now, it addresses the concepts of faith and hope, but this sets up only a theoretical framework that lacks real action in the world. Clement expressed strongly his disapproval of a solely conceptual practice of the Christian faith.

He compared it to the athlete who has the desire to compete but does not actually train.⁹ Rather, it is by sharing the love of Christ, or acting within the guidelines of moral rigor as set forth by Christ, that we live the truly Christian life. Such a conception sounds quite similar to Paul's concept of informed (in this case loving) action in 1 Corinthians 13 or later formulations of the relationship of works being a predicate to or symbol of faith.

True Gnosis as Truly Christian

As such, perhaps we should extend Clement's axiomatic formulation of his theology to, "knowledge is to be believed; faith is to be known (hoped for); *love is the expression of faith.*" With this third axiomatic statement, there is a directly relational element between the Christian virtues of faith, hope and love, the axiomatic expression of Clement's theology; and the methodological framework that is a direct product of his axiom of Christianity. Clement's own writings even hint at this relationship, though it is not expressed so clearly or directly:

"But let one come and subject oneself to reason as trainer and to Christ as mast of the contests. Let one's appointed food and drink be the Lord's new covenant, one's exercise the commandments, one's grace and adornment the fair virtues of *love, faith, hope*, knowledge of the truth, goodness, gentleness, compassion, gravity; in order that, when the last trumpet signals the end of the race and one's departure from the present life as from a course, one may with a good conscience stand before the judge a victor, admitted to be worthy of the motherland above, into which with angelic crowns and proclamations one now ascends."¹⁰

The subject of this entire passage is the rich Christian. However, we can interpret the passage in reference to any Christian person and it does not lose its strength and meaning. Although the relationship between the three Christian virtues and Clement's methodology towards theological construct might seem a bit of a stretch, I believe it is important for us to consider and interpret Clement's writings in light of his own historical setting.

Clement lived in a world that had no conception of deontological ethics and in a place that was a melting pot of theological, philosophical, scientific and mathematical ideas. In light of this, it would only be natural for Clement to try to incorporate the truth of other paradigms of knowledge into his own.

Furthermore, it would be only natural for him to set forth a theological conception of ethics rooted in virtue, since nearly all ethical theory that led up to this point in history was at heart an expression of the espousal of specific virtues. Considered and interpreted in this light, Clement's theology becomes a product of his historic-cultural setting that is most definitely going to set its paradigm of Christianity in the abilities and strengths of the individual.

Faithful Gnostic

Though this sympathetic interpretation of Clement acknowledges aspects of his methodology are deeply rooted in the Scriptures and are not aberrant to our knowledge of the character of God, it is unable to defend the most glaring problem of Clement's theology: 'true gnosis.'

⁹ CLEMENT of Alexandria, *The Rich Man's Salvation*. In Clement of Alexandria (tr. BUTTERS WORTH G. W.). Cambridge, 1960. 277.

¹⁰ *The Rich Man's Salvation*

His concept of the 'true gnosis' does undeniable and irreconcilable damage to the concept of ecclesiology in the Church. The hierarchy set in place by this notion and its emphasis on a special revelation that is not attainable for all Christians denies the importance of the Church and the Christian community.

When 'true gnosis' is considered, as it is here, as the theological expression of the need for action or love as a Christian virtue, the blow it renders to ecclesiology is diminished but not vanquished. In the end, regardless of the effects the 'true gnosis' has on the Christian conception of ecclesiology, Clement's description of the one who attains it is something that is an affront to our standard Christian conception of humanity as a fallen sinful creature.

For Clement, the Gnostic seemed not to resemble a person who would be a threat to Church doctrine and dogmatics in any way, but was a person of passion for the Lord. His description must inevitably make one question whether his doctrine of 'true gnosis' is heretical, or whether there is a need for the Church to revise her concept of ecclesiology and lay greater influence upon the individual's relationship with and calling from one's Creator.

At any rate, one who has received a clear conception of the things concerning God from the mystical chorus of the truth itself, makes use of the word of exhortation, exhibiting the greatness of virtue according to its worth, both in itself and in its effects, being united as intimately as possible with things intellectual and spiritual in the way of knowledge along with an inspired exaltation of prayer.

Hence one is always meek and gentle, affable, easy of access, forbearing, considerate and conscientious. In this person we have a severity of virtue, such as is not only proof against corruption, but proof against temptation also. This person presents a soul altogether unyielding and impregnable whether to the assaults of pleasure or of pain.

If reason calls this person to it, one is an unswerving judge, in no respect indulging one's passions, but keeping inflexibly to the path in which it is the nature of justice to walk, being fully persuaded that all things are admirably ordered, and that, for the souls which have made choice of virtue, progress is always in the direction of what is better, until they arrive at the Absolute Goodness, being brought close to the great High Priest, in the vestibule, so to speak, of the Father. This is the faithful Gnostic who is fully persuaded that all things in the world are ordered for the best. Certainly this person is well pleased with all that happens.

Suggested Reading

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Adam PRYOR:

Le cadre méthodologique de Clément d'Alexandrie

et sa relation avec les vertus bibliques à la lumière des concepts de Foi, Connaissance et Gnose

Nous pourrions être juste en proclamant que Clément d'Alexandrie a été le premier Père de l'Église à faire un travail sérieux dans le domaine de la philosophie de la religion. Ses travaux à propos, s'opèrent sous la condition selon laquelle la philosophie et la théologie sont différentes méthodologies qui convergent vers la même vérité universelle (notion qui est en contradiction avec plusieurs doctrines et dogmes de l'Église aujourd'hui). L'effort de Clément d'incorporer la pensée philosophique comme principe agrandissant en relation avec les vertus bibliques a abouti sur une série d'énoncés axiomatiques et de cadres méthodologiques qui sont inexorablement enracinés dans un paradigme anti-œcuménique et simultanément s'enracinent dans une perspective de la foi chrétienne qui met l'accent sur la situation individuelle pour agir dans une optique d'une compréhension toujours croissante de l'appel de Dieu dans le monde pour chacun de nous. Pour Clément, la Gnose n'est pas une menace pour l'Église, mais est représentative d'une personne ayant un grand zèle pour Dieu et est un caractère essentiel pour l'Église moderne.

Adam PRYOR:

Esquema Metodológico de Clemente de Alejandría

y su relación con las virtudes bíblicas, a la luz de los conceptos de la fe, el conocimiento y la gnosis

Estamos en lo correcto al afirmar que Clemente de Alejandría fue el primer padre de la Iglesia, que hizo un trabajo serio en el área de la filosofía de la religión. Su trabajo en este sentido opera bajo la condición expresa de que la filosofía y la teología son metodologías diferentes que apuntan hacia la misma verdad universal – una noción que está en conflicto directo con muchas doctrinas y dogmas de la Iglesia hoy. El intento de Clemente de incorporar el pensamiento filosófico como un principio amplificador en relación con las virtudes Bíblicas, resultó en un grupo de afirmaciones axiomáticas y un marco metodológico que está inexorablemente enraizado en un paradigma antiecuménico, mientras que simultáneamente se enraza en una fe únicamente basada en la perspectiva cristiana, que hace énfasis en la situación del individuo, para que actúe en una constante elevación de su conocimiento del llamado de Dios a cada uno de nosotros en este mundo. Para Clemente, los gnósticos no son una amenaza para la Iglesia, sin embargo al mismo tiempo es la personificación del celo por Dios, y es un personaje esencial para la Iglesia moderna.