

Jared Secord: *Christian Intellectuals and the Roman Empire. From Justin Martyr to Origen*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press 2020 (Inventing Christianity). XI, 202 p. \$ 99.95. ISBN: 978-0-271-08707-8.

The declared goal of this volume is to challenge the assumption that Jared Secord takes as universally accepted, namely that being a Christian – a declaration repeatedly affirmed in the authentic martyrs’ acts – was a factor that defined the way in which Christian intellectuals were viewed by the Roman authorities and other intellectuals in the period 150 to 230 CE. According to Secord, we must instead consider more carefully the competition between intellectuals striving for the favor of the emperor and public: Christian identity might not be the main reason for differentiation and contrast. Various intellectuals took part in the same debates and possessed the same cultural background, and Christians asserted in this struggle that they possessed a superior *παιδεία*. Christians and non-Christians therefore belonged to the same intellectual milieu and had similar philosophical interests (5).

Secord believes that it is a mistake to focus on what Christian authors say about their faith, asserting that we should instead try to understand what it was in their writings that interested their interlocutors. Having set forth this thesis in the introduction, Secord develops the argument in four chapters.

Providing context, the first chapter (“Emperors, Intellectuals, and the World of the Roman Empire”, 9–45) illustrates the cultural *facies* of the period, which was dominated by the Panhellenism promoted by the emperor Hadrian and his successors. The fascination with Greek culture constituted a challenge for Christian intellectuals, who adhered to what was viewed as a ‘barbarian’ tradition. They were forced to decide how to orient themselves between the two poles of Hellenism and ‘barbarism’.

With the second chapter, which is dedicated to Justin (“Justin Martyr: A Would-Be Public Intellectual”, 46–76), we enter into the details of the demonstration. Secord argues that Justin continued to see himself as part of the non-Christian intellectual world even after his conversion, and that the menace of persecution did not separate him from other intellectuals because “the threat of persecution was something that Justin and many

non-Christian intellectuals shared in common and was a fundamental factor in their identity as intellectuals” (47). In the competitive cultural world of the second century, persecution was always a menace for the intellectual who sought to achieve visibility. The strategy that Justin followed with his *Apologies* was that of self-legitimation as a philosopher addressing the emperor (an objective, however, that he failed to achieve) and calling attention to the persecutions that he undergoes, and this is why he emphasized in the *Second Apology* the charges laid against him by the Cynic Crescens.

Tatian, who is the protagonist of the third chapter (“Tatian versus the Greeks: Diversity in Christian Intellectual Culture”, 77–119), went further than his teacher Justin. It was no longer sufficient for Christian intellectuals to present themselves as philosophers. They needed to demonstrate their superiority in various fields. Therefore, Tatian’s *To the Hellenes* presents itself as an “encyclopedia in miniature” (81). After having analyzed parts of this work, especially those dedicated to astrology and demonology, in relationship to Greek authors’ treatments of those subjects, Secord hypothesizes that the intra-Christian accusation that Tatian was a heretic derived above all from the fact that Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria did not accept his rejection of Hellenic culture and his self-declaration as a ‘barbarian’, because both of them had a philhellenic background.

Lastly, the fourth chapter (“Christian Intellectuals and Cultural Change in the Third Century”, 120–146) presents two Christian intellectuals of the caliber of Julius Africanus and Origen, viewing them within the setting of a cultural climate that was changing and less Hellenocentric in the third century than it had been previously. Under the Severans other cultures and literatures come into view (for this reason much attention is given to the jurist Ulpian), but the advent of Alexander Severus under the guidance of his mother Julia Mamaea marks, with regard to Elagabalus, the return to the predominance of Graeco-Roman culture and it is in that context that we must understand the imperial favor shown to Africanus and Origen. Secord affirms that their Christian faith was not the reason why Africanus and Origen had access to the court.

Secord concludes that Christianity played a marginal role in the cultural conflicts of the third century, even if Christian intellectuals benefited from the weakening of Hellenocentrism in Roman culture in the third century (138). Only the institutionalization of Christianity “gave new recognition to Christians as Christians” (149), because the work of Christian intellectuals,

who were deeply imbued in the culture of the Empire, indicates that “Christianity was unexceptional and a product of the empire in which it developed, rather than a wholly new phenomenon” (ibid.).

Such, in short, are Secord’s claims. Let us begin with what the author considers his challenge to the *communis opinio*. He asserts that Christians and pagans shared the same cultural backdrop and that it is impossible to understand ancient Christian literature, which is the work of intellectuals, unless we fully place it in its context of society, culture, and dialogue with contemporary intellectuals. This is something with which we can completely agree and which, in fact, is widely shared in current studies. The fundamental works of Pierre Hadot on late antique philosophy (which Secord does not cite) show why Christian intellectuals viewed their faith as a philosophy: their goal was, on a par with that of philosophers, to achieve a satisfactory *modus vivendi*. Certainly, it is necessary to increase the detailed comparisons between the writings of Christian and non-Christian authors and here – Secord is right – more can be done. However, concluding from this common cultural basis that we can effectively cancel the specificity of the Christian authors, as though this was not in fact recognized by their adversaries, means taking up a position that is by no means new, but can in fact be traced back to Ulrich von Wilamowitz, who included Christian literature within the more general milieu of Greek and Latin literature. Likewise, to say that Christian intellectuals occupied a marginal position in the cultural dynamics of the second century is certainly true, but this does not eliminate the fact that already in the second century the writings of Christians were beginning to be recognized and there were those who understood both their special nature and their dangerousness. It is quite surprising that Secord fails to cite the Platonic intellectual Celsus, the author of the *Alēthēs Logos*, which is the first avowedly anti-Christian work known (second half of the second century), whereas he does mention the later Porphyry. If Secord had considered the work of Celsus – which was a response to Justin, according to Carl Andresen,¹ which work ought not to be overlooked –, he would have observed that Celsus was acquainted with the traditions regarding Jesus and that he criticized the lack of foundation for the Christians’ appeal to a divine relation and their hybrid monotheism. But above all Celsus was worried by the fact that Christians, because of the

1 C. Andresen: *Logos und Nomos. Die Polemik des Kelsos wider das Christentum*. Berlin 1955 (Arbeiten zur Kirchengeschichte 30).

pacifist stance of their leaders, were not inclined to join the army in a period (that of Marcus Aurelius) when the pressure on the boundaries of the Empire was on the increase. Therefore, while Christians were a minority, already in the second century in the East they possessed a certain social weight, if an intellectual thought it worth the effort to carry on his polemic at the practical as well as the theoretical level. Celsus' work has reached us, by and large, within the *Contra Celsum* of Origen, and here we find another deficiency in Secord's treatment. While he shows a solid acquaintance with late antique pagan literature, the same cannot be said regarding Christian writings, even though these are the object of his work. It is not possible to deal with Origen in a few pages, even if one considers only his relationship to the imperial house. This is all the more the case if, as Secord does, one treats the question of the two Origenes mentioned by Porphyry by concluding that they are one and the same person (but I have doubts about this). Works such as the *De principiis* or the *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, or (in fact) the *Contra Celsum*, which are all solidly based philosophical works that are fully Christian in their outlook, leave no doubt about whether Origen was known as a Christian. The situation with Julius Africanus is different, and in effect the more variegated nature of his writings will have recommended him for his erudition, regardless of his Christian faith.

But let us return to the author with which we began, Justin. The whole of Secord's approach involves a constant, total minimizing of what Justin in effect sought on behalf of Christians (*viz.* the end of the sporadic condemnations for the mere fact of being Christian), and it also suffers from a failure to contextualize Justin's two *Apologies* within the milieu of similar and previous writings. Indeed, Secord banishes to a note (n. 24 of the Introduction) the apologies of Quadratus and Aristides, which show that, in the context of the vast mass of petitions that were directed at emperors and local authorities, those of Christians stood out from the rest. In and of itself, this fact casts doubt on the thesis that Justin was primarily seeking to assert himself as a philosopher. But above all Secord fails to take into account the legal context established by Trajan's rescript addressed to Pliny the Younger. Indeed, he does not even mention it. Yet, this is not a partisan Christian document, which might therefore be viewed as suspect, but an official statement of position in response to what Pliny's query regarding the Christians of Bithynia. Trajan confirmed the illicit nature of Christian worship and at the same time entrusted to the discretion of local au-

thorities the handling of possible, non-anonymous denunciations of Christians. In view of this fundamental document, how is it possible to place on the same level the condemnation of Christians and the repression or difficulties that, for various reasons, non-Christian intellectuals might suffer? In my opinion, these fundamental shortcomings render any discussion of Secord's individual assertions on Justin superfluous, all of which are, furthermore, conjectural. Secord shows that he has carefully read Tatian; but he could have made better use of the work of Gabriella Aragione,² which, although cited in a general note and listed in the bibliography, in actuality remains unused. When he deals with the accusation that Tatian was a heretic, which actually cannot be proved on the basis of what survives of Tatian's work, he again resorts to conjectures. His claim that it was Tatian's strongly anti-Hellenic stance that favored his accusation of heresy by Christians [despite the admission that Irenaeus' remarks regarding him are "frustratingly brief" (112)] is one possible because he utterly disregards the actual accusation made by Irenaeus, namely that Tatian affirmed the damnation of Adam (regardless of the unrelated question whether such a charge reflected the truth or not). When Secord then goes on to the opinion of Clement of Alexandria (who, as he rightly recalls, does not explicitly label Tatian a heretic), he must again minimize Clement's praise of Tatian for having demonstrated 'in a thorough manner' the precedence of Moses and he must also argue that the criticism of Tatian's interpretation of the verb γενηθήτω ("let there be light") of Gen. 1.3 is a linguistic criticism of his having misunderstood it as an optative rather than as an imperative. Clement, instead, when he criticizes the interpretation of the verb as εὐκτικόν is referring to the fact that Tatian understands it as a prayer addressed by the demiurge to another god. Regardless of whether he is right or wrong in what he attributes to him, Clement accuses Tatian of believing in two different gods (i.e., of having passed over to Gnosticism). Here we see Secord's bias when interpreting Christian texts. Instead of starting from what they actually say, so as to offer hypotheses that eventually explain also that which they do not say or what they imply, he completely disregards what they say so that he can suggest hypotheses without an adequate basis in the texts.

2 G. Aragione (ed.): *Taziano, Ai Greci*. Milano 2015 (Lecture cristiane del primo millennio 52).

In this sense, the reading of this volume can be useful, because it reminds us of the larger problem that every historian, especially an ancient historian, faces: the delicate balance between respect for a text and the attempt to elicit answers from it by asking the right questions and following a strict method.

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Empfohlene Zitierweise

Emanuela Prinzivalli: Rezension zu: Jared Secord: Christian Intellectuals and the Roman Empire. From Justin Martyr to Origen. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press 2020 (Inventing Christianity). In: Plekos 23, 2021, 111–116 (URL: <http://www.plekos.uni-muenchen.de/2021/r-secord.pdf>).
