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## **The Practice of Baptizing Infants: Instauration of the Resurrection Order and the Doctrine of the Original Sin \*\***

**Abstract:** One of the traditions extant in today's world – especially in its Eastern part, but also in the mostly Catholic, traditional countries – is the baptism of infants. This gesture is close to – almost indistinct from – the coming into the world of a new member of the city, and it represents a sort of consecration, a sacralization of its existence, correlative to the act of civil registration of its birth. Surprising is especially the massive presence of this tradition, which lingers on at the same time with and independently from the emancipation of the society from religiosity, the superlative valorization of the principle of free speech, expression, and choice and the ever more visible emphasis on the importance of the infant's rights. Thus, a tradition that unimpededly goes against the current and, furthermore, a tradition that lacks the appropriate amount of contemplation.

Hence the aim of this work is to ponder and to reflect upon the ritual of baptizing infants – a practice imposed by tradition and with vague dogmatic confirmation (the Third Carthage Synod) – and to propose, beside an excursion into the history of mentalities, a phenomenological understanding of the “internal” necessity of “baptism” in the Christological scenario. The main sources analyzed in our approach are Paul's letters, and the apologetic work of Saint Justin the Philosopher.

This work proposed to follow the thread of the meanings of baptism starting from the analysis of such inaugural texts as the Epistles of Saint Paul, which reveal an extremely interesting practice – the baptism in the name of the dead – which may be seen as a prelude of infant baptism. Two are the important, essential items of this article: the relationship between baptism and resurrection, and the importance given to the doctrine of the original sin on the background of the extension of the pedobaptism. Baptism is a simulacrum of the resurrection, and this illuminates “the necessity and the universality” of the practice of baptizing infants. Christianity is instituted as a religion only at the moment of its confirmation, when it goes from the condition of mere signaling, promising, and delivering the good news of the abolishment of death to the condition of a *fait accompli*. Also thanks to the permeation of the practice of pedobaptism, “Adam's sin” is rediscovered as theological justification of such practice and transformed into what would later be called the doctrine of the “original sin.”

**Keywords:** baptism, resurrection, redemption, tradition, custom, freedom.

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## 1. St Paul's refutation of baptism by circumcision.

### The necessary condition of baptism: the faith of the baptized

The “baptism” in Christ has a meaning that pervades all Paul's epistles and the other apostolic writings: the faith in Jesus *as Christ* (Messiah, the Expected One, the Son of God). In fact, St Paul almost misses no opportunity to emphasize a *nuance* – of the importance of a true “religious” or “ideological” cataclysm: the negation of the necessity of the “circumcision” or, to use an anachronism useful in this discussion, the Jewish “baptism”. A good deal of his epistles, as well as the origin of his conflict with Apostle Peter, have the same source: Paul's conviction that circumcision must not be imposed as baptismal institution to the “converts” to the old-new faith. A good example is offered by the *Epistle to the Corinthians* 7: 18-19:

Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision. Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing; but obeying the commandments of God is everything. (Paul 2010, 2008)

I say the “old-new faith” as Paul – at least at first – thought that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of promises and prophecies included in what Christians now call the Old Testament. Thus in the *Epistle to the Galatians* 4: 4-5: “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children” (Paul 2010, 2048) or in the *Epistle to the Romans* 10:4 “For Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.” (Paul 2010, 1990). The comment of the exegete is clarifying:

The Greek *télos* means not only end, but also aim, finality, purpose, deadline, fulfillment, accomplishment, result, consequence, plenitude, culmination, corollary, completion, and Paul's theological thought incorporates all of them in one and the same word and fructifies them in the fundamental idea that the Old Law has come to an end in Jesus Christ exactly because He represents its plenitude. In an Orthodox liturgical prayer, Christ is defined as the completion of the law and the prophets. (Anania 2011, 2423)

In fact, during his apostolic, missionary activity, it was precisely the Jewish communities that were first aimed at and visited. We have to rebuild in our minds the whole drama of the debates on this topic, as well as the compromises that sometimes Paul is forced to accept, namely circumcising *with his own hand* one of his new followers to dodge the hostility of conservative circles. I am talking about Timothy in Acts 16:3.

Even though Paul does not associate any value to the circumcision, he makes a concession in the case of Timothy, which the Jews might have accused of apostasy if, after having been born from a Jewish mother, he would have remained uncircumcised. This deed is part of the missionary strategy of the Apostle; Timothy is ordered to preach to the Jews, he becomes the close disciple of Paul and the first bishop of Ephes. (Anania 2011, 2380)

Thus we may say that one of the Paul's main religious "reforms" is the contestation – sometimes subtle, sometimes adamant – of the "primacy", the importance or the necessity of circumcision. It is by no means impossible that this very "critique" of Paul against circumcision may have been one of the major factors that led to the final dissociation of Christianity from Judaism. What started as a continuation of a millenary religious discourse, the "happy" fulfillment of a soteriological expectation intimately intricate in the fabric of Judaism, turned into a religion *different, self-contained* and in competition with it. Social practice, tradition was – this time – decisive in the conflict of ideas.

For the Apostle Paul circumcision seems to have been really "crucial". He echoes the universalist message of Jesus – and circumcision is "loaded" by history and has a special meaning – the "covenant" between the Jewish people and God. It was completely improbable that a symbol with such specific mark would not vex – either knowingly or not – any "non-Jew" that might have been interested to adhere to the Christian idea. Conversely, it is very likely that, once the matter had been decided in favor of the conservatives, the "baptism" in Christ by circumcision would have a much larger number of Jewish followers and, who knows, maybe even the Christological transformation of Judaism – which was actually the very first intention of the Master and His disciples. One should also not ignore the possibility, if circumcision had been accepted, that the seeds of Christianity would have been dispersed on the field of the numerous prophetic movements of Judaism, of secondary or temporary importance, absorbed and finally... forgotten by it.

A strategist of genius – let us remember he himself uses military terminology to describe apostleship – Paul seems to implicitly or explicitly know all these "ins and outs" and risks of accepting the circumcision and thus his tone becomes more and more sharp, even when he gives his absolutely formal consent of a contextually justified circumcision. His theory on the uselessness of circumcision is on other occasions reiterated over and over, when he does not forget to emphasize the profound nuisance of having to discuss these matters.

The Pauline alternative to the Jewish "baptism" – circumcision – is at the same time a volt of genius. He insists enormously upon a so-called "baptism in Spirit", which is nothing but a state of mind or, if preferred, a spiritual state: faith. This is accompanied by love and hope – which, together with the first, will constitute the famous triad of the cardinal Christian virtues, already sketched in the *Epistle to the Galatians* 5: 5-6: "For through the Spirit, by faith,

we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love.” (Paul 2010, 2049) The reinterpretation of the “ritual” of “initiation” in terms of new “emotional dispositions” (“states of mind”, emotions or feelings) is a genuine transfiguration of the “baptism” by Paul, we might say a real change of paradigm – which affects the very bases and the constitution of Christianity. A possible history of affectivity must certainly take into account this turning point and the motivations – in a certain sense political and ideological – of this explosion of the importance of affectivity – and implicitly subjectivity – in the Christian European culture.

In a similar manner, the apostle Paul had “solved” the matter relatively pressing among Corinthians of the “powers” (*charismas*) that the latter had been waiting for so long without any result as reward for their faith in Christ. After a didactic classification of the “powers”, whose purpose was to regain peace of mind by reassuring the impatient Jesus followers that each of them possessed, if not all charismas and even though not always knowingly, a *certain* “power” – one of them the gift of prophecy, another the gift of tongues etc., St Apostle Paul causes one of the most obvious and sublime diversions in the history of ideas: the love hymn. A true “master hit”, as we would call it nowadays, a “distraction” of attention from important matters... The change of focus from the “can” to the “feel”/ “have love” is truly remarkable. All the more remarkable as the object of Corinthians’ requests – the powers, the charismas – is not buried, but explicitly minimized, ridiculed, as opposed to a *feeling*, love, which gains colossal importance even on the background of such minimization. The circle is closed, the rhetorical “demonstration” is complete and leaves us with no right of reply. Important is not the “power”, but rather the “state”, not the “object”, but rather the “subject”, not what is happening to you, but what you feel with respect to what is happening to you. It is obviously not difficult to identify in this change of perspective certain essential data about subjectivity in the Hellenistic culture. From the sophists to the stoics, from Protagoras to Epictetus, from Socrates to Epicurus – the “subject” affirms itself more and more before the “object”, the “sensation” claims more and more assiduously its exclusive right over the “truth”. It is astonishing to have in the person and the writings of St Paul – almost visually – the very document of the meeting between two cultural and equally mental horizons: a purview that values the “fact”, the “object”, and a purview that values the “feeling” and the “subject”. The Jewish tradition remains profoundly adherent to an “objective” moral and religion: I have in view here the precise, almost legalist meaning of the notions of “sin”, God, righteousness, fulfilled prophecy, “wonder”, Messiah. Paul faces this Jewish mentality directly and tries to fight it or, more exactly, to divert it from its path, to reconfigure it into a model in which the emphasis is imperceptibly, but decisively shifted towards the subjectivity, the inner experience, the sensitivity. However, Paul

remains an apologist of objective facts: Jesus is the – incontestable – fact of the “incarnation”, the “evidence” and the “confirmation” of God’s prophecies and promises. Even if emphasized in a completely different way in the new paradigm, faith is in its turn grounded on observed, experimented and confessed facts: the wonders worked by Jesus during His lifetime and – the supreme “empirical” argument – His resurrection. The very conversion of Paul – from persecutor into an apostle of Christ – is owed to a personal *experience* and is the consequence of a directly experienced *fact*. It was this very “physicalist” meaning of divinity, as well as the proper, corporeal sense of the “immortality” that would cause perplexity in the “Greek” world – but also a special “professional” interest in the rhetorical schools in perpetual search for sensational matters; thus we may see in Paul the overlapping of two “worlds” or rather the perspectives of two worlds...

To return to the issue of pedobaptism, one must start by saying that in none of the primary texts of Christianity – neither in the Gospels nor in the apostolic epistles – is there any foundation for this practice. The only biblical text quoted in matters of the original sin is a fragment from the *Epistle to the Romans* 5, 12: “Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned.” (Paul 2010, 1983) As much as this text is ambiguous, it actually emphasized the relationship between the sin perpetrated by Adam (“all by himself”) and its aftermath – death (conveyed to everyone). This idea is further unraveled in verses 17-18:

For if, because of the one man’s trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ. Therefore, just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. (Paul 2010, 1983-1984)

The descendants of Adam are named by Paul “sinners” by extrapolation, as sufferers of the consequences of Adam’s mistake. Man is a “sinner” as he bears the repercussion of sin, namely death. Man is a sinner because he dies. But Jesus comes and abolishes this “sin” – death: “just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” (Romans 5, 21, Paul 2010, 1983-1984).

This is simply explicated by the fact that Jesus’s teaching is not constituted as a *religion different from Judaism*, but as its continuation and fulfillment, so the “baptism” issue is not posed for the Jewish children (who were already “circumcised”), and a request for baptism from pagan/gentile children could not be reckoned with. Baptism is in all gospel texts an issued that concerns

only the adult, mature man, and as we have seen, the problem becomes really techy with respect to pagans that receive the baptism in Christ. Do they have to first go through circumcision or may they receive solely the symbolical baptism, with water and the Holy Spirit, by which – within Judaism and without renegading it, as one must emphasize – Jesus Christ’s followers were singularized?! This is absolutely crucial to decipher the “mystery” that led to the institution of Christianity as a religion in and of itself. It is not by chance that it plays such critical role in Paul’s letters. For the people who would call for the circumcision of “pagans” upon their conversion to the faith in Christ could not, in their turn, do away with the fact that a specifically “Christian” ritual – without circumcision – would turn the faith in Christ into a quite different religion than the Jews’. On the other hand, St Paul could not accept this constraint as it would directly conflict the universality of Christ’s message and, from a practical viewpoint, it was quite easy to predict that such invasive, intrusive ritual would enormously reduce the readiness for conversion for people interested in following Christ.

**2. The reason for the embracement of pedobaptism by the Church:  
the instauration facto of the resurrection order.  
Disarming the “millenarianist” peril**

So the pedobaptism issue is most probably only posed after the Church of Christ is constituted more and more obviously as a religion different from – even opposed to – Judaism. It was only after the first generations born from Christian (probably non-Jewish) parents that the tradition of baptizing infants is instituted – without any doctrinal basis. Thus it is no wonder that the baptism of infants in a canonical text is actually *an attestation* of such practice. Baptizing infants is not and has never been a *sacrament* of the Church, instituted by dogma, but is a mere tradition *adopted by the Church*. In fact, the complicated history of pedobaptism is mirrored by the fact that, in parallel with the baptism of infants, the authentic “sacrament of baptism” continued to exist for many centuries, aiming at grown-ups with power of discernment, who beside expressing their faith in Christ, had to be catechized, which means that they had to master the teachings and credos accredited by the Church (the so-called catechumen).

Beside all these reasons, can one really talk about a necessity of this practice, one that would belong to the Christianity itself? What could it actually be? The answer derives from the above. Faith in Christ is grounded on the *fact* of a fulfillment, on the *affirmance* of a prophecy, on the observance of a covenant or a promise. Even though His Coming had been predicted, we cannot talk about faith in Him but after the moment of His emergence, namely after the *actual* occurrence of what “had been written”. But this coming is in its turn a promise, this fulfillment includes another expectation,

and the prophecy is only half confirmed as long as Jesus in His turn *promises* that, by Him, we would achieve eternal life. Jesus dies and rises again; this shows us indeed, in Him and through Him, that this is possible, that our hope makes sense, and that our expectation does not aim at the object of false prophecy. However... People still die after Christ, so is St Paul tersely being told by people who have unsophisticatedly thought that Christ literally abolished death. It is the fatality of any faith “millenarian”, eschatological – as is, at its origins, Christianity itself – to face such... embarrassing moments when time, with elemental cynicism, erases with a single blow the beautiful castles made by the sand of our hopes. “Nevertheless, even after Christ, people continue to die...” – how many times must St Paul have heard this dolorous and tragic lamentation, this staggering amazement of people who were no longer ready to die, people who would no longer believe they would ever die after Christ Himself, the Son of God, had brought them the good news: The ones who believe in Me will never die! Believers die, our people die, so is Paul told from everywhere, again facing, this time a last, decisive, challenge: to interpret the resurrection allegorically and the baptism literally. Paul responds to the stringency of such expectations of the instauration of eternal kingdom by investing the baptism in Christ with this attribute, by describing the baptism in terms of realizing the eternal kingdom. As we well know, seeing in a *representation* the real presence, *in actu*, of the represented object is the foundation of the concept of sacrament – from now on, a fundamental one for Christianity. Baptism has generated a transubstantiation of the moral soul into an immortal soul. If it is true that Jesus is, apparently, the only Man who rose from the dead, no less true is that, by identifying ourselves with Him through baptism, we ourselves have died and risen again. Substantially, the transformation occurred, the transfiguration of the soul from mortal to immortal took place by baptism, the rest is just a matter of time, unessential, unsubstantial.

Brethren, don't you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore, we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. *So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.*

The fact that utterance of this fragment from the *Epistle to the Romans* VI 3-11 plays such central role in the infant baptism service shows us beyond

reasonable doubt that the meaning of the sacrament of baptism is the immortality of souls. Without this confirmation – both symbolic *and* real – that the resurrection promised by Christ and through Christ has taken place in each and every one who believes and is baptized in Him, faith in Christ would never have been more than one of the numerous false, unfulfilled prophecies, embarrassed upon “maturity deadline.” Paul’s genius succeeds in disarming the “time bomb” of any millenarian faith and – as I. P. Culianu would put it – by an operation at the level of the phantasmatic apparatus – manages to enforce for thousands of years the perception of an image as though it were factual reality. Christianity as a religion fundamentally a faith in the *immortality of the individual*, the eternal life, and the resurrection. Thus it addresses *people already resurrected, already immortal*, in a certain sense *already saved*. Christianity is fulfilled only after the realization of the ontological order that Jesus and the gospel writers have announced. The gospel, the good *news*, is the fore-going of Christianity, which exists in the proper sense only inasmuch as such good news is confirmed. The institution of baptizing infants secures or covers this logical necessity. Once baptism is inflicted from the earliest age, Christianity literally addresses already resurrected people, souls that have become immortal (by the sacrament of baptism), and Christianity becomes *an accomplished fact* and in full sense *a religion*. From now on the stringency of expecting the fulfillment of the promise of eternal life is disarmed, and the task – if we may call it so – of living up to the height of one’s soul devolves upon the individual. Once the practice of baptizing infants is universalized, the Christian Church has under its jurisdiction true Christians, that is immortal souls, people already resurrected.

### **3. Pedobaptism – the gateway to the Christian world of the original sin**

It is very likely that the importance acquired in the history of Christianity by the original sin (more exactly its transgenerational propagation) is owed to the instauration of this practice of pedobaptism. However, such conjecture is rather difficult to accept for today’s man, who is accustomed – after two millennia of theology – to identify Jesus Christ’s very role of savior with the one of restauration of Adamic purity before committing the primordial blunder. Nevertheless, the idea of original sin isn’t vested with much importance either in the gospels, or in the epistles of St Paul, in the first apologetic writings or, for that matter, in the entire Old Testament. Precisely as it belongs to the “origins”, Adam’s “mistake” falls under the category of “genesis” myths (being derived from the *Genesis*), which explicate in a trans-historical manner the occurrence of an existent reality: a physical phenomenon, an animal species, a custom, etc.; the myth at hand *explicates* the mortality of men, and nothing more. The original sin opens and closes the circle of the human condition: it is “atoned for” by the very mortality of the human being.

It is true that the sin and the punishment inflicted upon men (death) coincide *ab initio*, are simultaneous, but what is “inherited” by Adam’s descendants is not the *sin*, but rather the human condition of a mortal being; so the effect, not the cause. There are other sins that God has to taunt his people with; there are other sins that Jesus and the prophets guide people to repent for and to stay away from; these are the historical, specific and individual sins, whereas the “original sin” is not even invoked as a terrifying example of the consequences of disobedience.

In fact, the abolition of death and of the consequence of the “original sin” by Christ does not involve in any way the annulment of the cause either, as long as man is not restored in the condition of Edenic innocence. Furthermore, one may say that the *true, essential* consequence of the original sin, namely man’s *awareness of good and evil*, remains untouched by the “dissolution of death”, as discernment is the very condition for the man’s possibility of receiving divine Judgment and Justice. It is by no accident that the “bodily”, “corporeal” attribute of the resurrection has been incessantly emphasized, in spite of the contrariety caused by such a “material” perspective. Resurrection operates in the “material” cause, on *bodies* rather than souls, as a spiritual “resurrection” would mean the restoration of the primordial condition, that is the complete dissolution of the “awareness of good and evil” and their respective effects, of the notion of sin and punishment and thus the impossibility of Judgment, so in the end it would involve universal absolution, the forgiveness of all souls, including the redemption of the Devil. Such an outcome was actually formulated by Origen; the idea is revived much later, somewhat unexpectedly, in the texts of Friedrich Nietzsche, together with the claim that a restoration of the pre-Christian “innocence” would enforce the dissolution of the awareness of good and evil, and this would involve going back, which means beyond – or beneath – the setting-up of such theological-moral concepts in our mind.

In Justin the Philosopher, for instance, the myth of the original sin plays no role at all. Even though the Old Testament is for him the only authoritative reference, he prefers to choose from it – to explain the occurrence of evil in the world – an episode rather secondary and obscure, the one about the intercourse between angels and human females. The result of this coupling is the advent of demons – masters of this world, whom men worshipped as gods, because of their frightening powers. Thus Justin totally ignores the “original sin” as an explanation for the occurrence of evil, and reading such texts it is quite instructive, as they were written before the “original sin” became the official explication of the Church for the appearance of evil into the world, as they illustrate that other “necessities” than the logical or the theological have led to the final formulation of the doctrine.

In our case the necessity was, we think, an... accident occurred in the history of Christianity, namely the spreading of the practice of baptizing

infants/ pedobaptism. It is not only in the linguistic, but also in the religious domain, that dictates... the norm. For in the initial form of the baptism – as baptism of the grown-up – the object of the ablation was the sins perpetrated by the person up to the time of the baptism, not at all the original sin; there is no reference in the baptism service to the original sin of the proto-parents. The Christian baptism “washes away” personal sins, rather than the sins of other people.

The doctrine of the original sin earns importance fortuitously, as derived from a newly appeared custom, in its turn ungrounded on doctrine. For the first Christians who decided to baptize their babies faced the challenge posed by the repetition of the “ritual ablution,” the purification in Christ of the innocent infant. If the other aspects could be solved “by delegation” – the confession of faith was done for the bereft-of-reason infant by the “godparents”, but there still remained the most important issue, the object of the baptism, its purpose. For the purpose of the baptism in its primary version was certainly the repentance, the renouncement of old sins and of the way of living that was inadequate for the new faith; however, such purpose remained without content in the case of the innocent infant. The necessity to bring content to this custom occurred after the attempt to justify the practice of pedobaptism by the synod edicts. The latter were constraint to invoke for the justification of baptizing infants nothing other than... the ancestral sin, the sin perpetrated by Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. It must be again emphasized that before this moment, the myth of the “original sin” was of absolutely secondary importance. Thanks to the baptism of infants, to this “profane” religious “custom” – in a way also a “heretical” one, because not only is it instituted without explicit doctrine prescription, but also against clear principles of the Christian *faith* (salvation is only obtained by the “circumcision of the heart”, that is by the *personal* confession of the faith in Christ) – the original sin begins its bright theological and... philosophical career. During the “Christian era” the original sin would give birth to numerous paradoxes, contradictions, obscurities, and apologies: Christianity, initially a “teaching” of freedom, and the free will, accepts in its very core the idea of the predestination of man. In spite of what Kierkegaard believes, this contradiction is not “intrinsic” to the foundations of the Christian faith, even though the original sin was meant to become – we already know that – a fundamental idea of the Christian religion.

Starting upwards, from practice to the theory or the norm, from the “people” to the clerical elite, pedobaptism brings with it as collateral effect the resurrection of Adam’s sin from the depths of the Old Testament, its recirculation for the purpose of justifying the new custom.

I think I have sufficiently demonstrated that for the first church fathers both the issue of baptizing infants (either under the form of circumcision or as the Christian baptism) and the issue of the original sin are not at all

considered. Their lacking *together* becomes more significant as they appear for the first time still *together*. Thus in the first text that attests the custom of baptizing infants, we speak of the letter of St Cyprian to Fidus, written on the occasion of the third synod of Carthage, which took place in 253 AD, the question concerning the “age” when the infant should be baptized is answered that, as baptism cannot be refused for any adult, however hard he might have sinned against God, if he repents,

much more ought not an infant to be debarred, who being newly born has in no way sinned, except that being born after Adam in the flesh, he has by his first birth contracted the contagion of the old death; who is on this very account more easily admitted to receive remission of sins, in that not his own but another’s sins are remitted to him. (St Cyprian 1868, 197-198)

Hence is invoked, one hundred years before the birth of St Augustin – the first author to use the term “original sin” (*peccato originali*) –, for the first time, Adam’s sin to justify the custom of baptizing infants. Even though he relates Adam’s sin to the foundation of infant baptism, St Cyprian is still rather precautionous: Adam’s sin does only belong to the baptized child by its consequence, by the mortality perpetuated in the humankind. But nuances are the first to be erased by the passing of time. After more than a century, the idea of transmission of the original sin together with the custom of pedobaptism have become so consistently rooted on the Christian soil that St Augustin philosophizes on the harmony (however contradictory!) between “predestination” and “liberty”, and between “fatality” and “free will.” In fact, he is very aware of the merit of the Carthage synod in “keeping the faith of the Church steady.”

The occurrence and the rooting of the binomial pedobaptism-original sin are not without reactions. And the fact that the original sin is contested also together with the necessity of baptizing infants is, again, as relevant as it can be. Witness for this is the edict issued, another two centuries later (418), by a Synod also in Carthage, where under canon 110 it provides that “it was similarly decided that anyone who denies or says that little infants or newborns from their mothers’ womb, upon their baptism, are not baptized to get rid of their sins and do not attract anything from the ancestral sin of Adam, which must be achieved by the bath of rebirth (from which it follows that in them, with respect to the baptism form, one does not talk about the true, but the false renouncement of sins), shall be anathema; for it is so that the words of the apostle are to be interpreted:

Likewise it seemed good that whosoever denies that infants newly from their mother's wombs should be baptized, or says that baptism is for remission of sins, but that they derive from Adam no original sin, which needs to be removed by the laver of regeneration, from whence the conclusion follows, that in them the form of baptism for the remission of sins, is to be understood as false and not

true, let him be anathema. For no otherwise can be understood what the Apostle says, « By one man sin has come into the world, and death through sin, and so death passed upon all men in that all have sinned », than the Catholic Church everywhere diffused has always understood it. For on account of this rule of faith (regulam fidei) even infants, who could have committed as yet no sin themselves, therefore are truly baptized for the remission of sins, in order that what in them is the result of generation may be cleansed by regeneration. (Canons of the Eight Local Synod of Carthage).

In fact, both this and the third ecumenical synod, held in Ephesus in 431, condemn Pelagianism, which claims, against the contra doctrine of St Augustin, the total liberty and responsibility of the human individual, namely literally: *the inexistence of a transmission of primordial sin and thus the uselessness of the baptism of infants.*

#### **4. Pedobaptism – an expression and a sample of the syncretic vocation of Christianity**

Our analysis of the Christian pedobaptism has revealed a sample from the essential make-up of Christianity: the forging of the new faith in Christ on the Jewish and the Greek and Roman traditions. First, pedobaptism makes a compromise with the Jewish imperative of “circumcising” the infant: baptism takes the place of the Jewish circumcision inflicted to the infant; a circumcision “in Spirit”, it’s true, but still a circumcision, as this is actually the name with which the baptism of infants is insistently called in its first occurrences in the doctrine. Second, the binomial pedobaptism – original sin trades with an entire tragic Greek tradition and sensibility: the one concerning the destiny, and the predestination. The very idea of a sort of “original sin” had crossed the platonic heaven (as souls end up falling because of a mysterious fault, a crush, a burden, or their mere indolence), as it appears for instance in *Phaedrus* 248 c:

If any soul becomes a companion to a god and catches sight of any true thing, it will be unharmed until the next circuit; and if it is able to do this every time, it will always be safe. If, on the other hand, it does not see anything true because it could not keep up, and by some accident takes on a burden of forgetfulness and wrongdoing, then it is weighed down, sheds its wings and falls to earth... (Plato 1997, 526)

Finally, the fame that oracles enjoyed among the Greeks, as well as the glory of the literary genre that glorifies blind, irrational destiny – tragedy – unfolds the presence of a powerful fatalist thinking vein, a deterministic paradigm in the bosom of Hellenic culture. Oddly enough, the idea of man’s total freedom and self-determination (self-salvation?) – by his faith and deeds – propagated by Jesus Christ is in simultaneous accord both with the Jewish background

from which it emerges, and with the Latin cultural, literary, and philosophical traditions. Christianity – a syncretic religion par excellence – will have to gather together under the same roof and to “accommodate” contradictions welling from such different traditions and ideas: predestination and liberty, salvation by faith/ personal deeds and salvation by “grace”, baptism by conscious choice and “circumcision in Spirit” of newborns, let alone the incomprehensible transcendence of the divinity and its identification with an “inglorious body”. Dogma, before being a special mode of knowledge, is, as Lucian Blaga thinks, a cultural way of defining a new “identity”, vast and diverse, by juxtaposing opposing tenets, which are representative for the mental or spiritual profile of each of its component parts. “By the tension without a solution between the incongruent « elements » and « truths » of Hellenism, the field is slowly prepared for the dogma.” (Blaga 2013, 146) The human being is free *and* predestined, innocent *and* carrier of an ancestral sin, mortal *and* immortal, and its God is both divine *and* human. The Christian religion – as a universalist religion – truly lays the foundations of a universalist and... universal Europe.

The new Christian baptism – the baptism of infants – excoriates, as we have already seen, the transformation of the Christian faith into a... religion. And not just because, by this trick by which Christians are considered as *already* partaking in the resurrection order, Christianity escapes the fatal stringency of *confirmation* that impairs any millenarianism, but (especially?) because by pedobaptism the Christianity exercises the essential vocation of any “universalist” religion: syncretism. The peculiarity of the faith in Christ must become looser and looser, and more and more open for the new religion to be able to absorb an indefinite diversity of sensibilities and mentalities. To be accepted on a large scale, the “great rupture” caused by Christ must give way to the emphasis of the *connections* of Christianity to preceding traditions, customs, religions, and philosophies. Paradoxically, the contrast becomes even more relevant on the background of similarities, and novelty becomes even more striking by the invocation of the old, i.e. the Old Testament, the old Greco-Roman traditions, and the old philosophies.

## 5. The case of a fine tuner of Christian syncretism: Justin the Philosopher. Prefiguration as prophecy or as theft of future originality

The work of one of the first Christian apologists, Justin the Philosopher, is mainly confined to his attempt of connecting the new faith in Christ to things already said and though, i.e. interpreted, in their turn, retroactively, as sacred anticipations of the faith in Christ (the prophecies of the Old Testament), as incomplete and laic philosophical prefiguration (Heraclitus, Socrates, Plato), or, finally, as caricatured, deformed, and deceitful impersonations of it, infused

into people by earth-ruling demons, with the intention of bringing it to naught (the Greco-Roman mythology). Thus in his *First Apology*, XXI, Justin explicitly claims:

When we say that the Word too, who is God's first-born, Jesus Christ, our Master, was born on earth, without bodily implication, and that He, after having been crucified and risen again, went to Heaven, *we bring nothing new* (my italics) as compared to what is said by yourselves about your so-called sons of Zeus. You know full-well how many sons of Zeus are talked about by your most honored writers. They speak of Hermes, the interpreting word of Zeus and the teacher of all, of Asclepius, who was also a medic and who, hit by a lightning, rose to heaven, of Dionysus, who was torn into pieces [...] And what else shall we say about your emperors who die and who you pretend to make immortal by bringing forth someone that claims under oath to have seen the Caesar, who was burning on the stake, rising up from the blaze to the heavens? (St Justin 1980, 40)

Another example: to "include" the immortality, more precisely the resurrection of the body, into the Christian faith, Justin appeals to the (much as marginal and ambiguous) beliefs accepted by the Greco-Roman cultural-religious system: the invocation of the dead to find out the truth, the examination of innocent children's dead bodies, the evocation of people souls, the existence of "demonized" or "furious", that is people "overtaken and shaken by the souls of the dead", the oracles of Amphiloquia, Dodona and Pythia, the teachings of such writers as Pythagoras, Plato, and Socrates, and the "pit talked about by Homer and the Ulysses' descent to see such mysteries." Justin's conclusion is crystal-clear: "So embrace us too, as you do those others, as we believe in God no less, but more than they do, and we expect the dead who were buried in the ground to take up their bodies again, as we think that for God nothing is impossible." (St Justin 1980, p. 38) For the entire XXI part of his first Apology, Justin incessantly attempts to accommodate the Christian faith with the cultural facts accepted by the Romans.

However, Justin is aware that most of these myths are but *fictions* or "fables" for the Romans, as he repeatedly calls them. Greeks and Romans relate to them as "mods" or pretexts of artistic creations or intellectual, speculative, or rhetorical exercises. The Greco-Latin *Weltanschauung* had actually reached a maximum of demythologization and "scientificity", probably similar to the one of today's world. Stoicism is a "religion of Reason", a sort of Enlightenment or even positivism *avant la lettre*, in which case the "gods" or the "divinity" are nothing but figures of speech, simple metaphors. The imperial cult, i.e. the cult of the emperors, can only be understood by thinking about the ceremonial (but inane) manner in which we "treat" the person of a high dignitary today, by respecting his position, but also being able to disconnect it from the flesh-and-blood person.

Thus Justin's apologetic approach faces a major challenge. What could actually legitimize the Christian faith, namely the ideas and beliefs already

extant and accepted in the Greco-Latin cultural and religious system, represents a very perilous argument for the de-legitimation of the faith in Christ for a very simple reason: *actually*, no “pagan” really believes in the truth of the mythological figures and characters. For him the “sacred figures” are but fictions and allegories of which he thinks in a formal, institutional and in no way literal manner. Hence, to get out of this spiny imbroglio, Justin is impelled, as we have already seen, to resort to a forte solution, a mythologizing and ultra-temporal fudge: evil demons have inculcated these mythological-literary fictions upon human minds for the precise purpose of undermining the Truth embodied by Christ. Demons had mimicked, imitated, plagiarized, and caricatured Christ *before His birth* precisely to prevent the faith in Him at the moment of his advent, and to devalue his *originality*. Compared to the already extant mythological-literary fictions – some of which, though partially similar with the incarnation of Christ, aberrant and immoral, and (this goes for all of them!) lacking one of the conditions of true opinion: the conviction, the faith of the believer – Christ was meant to appear for the pagans that would come to know Him a... fake or a copy of them, a second-hand character, inspired by them and collecting all their vices, worst of all, as we have mentioned, the fact that nobody invest with reality such characters pertaining to this species of personifications. There is still a question to be answered, namely how the demons knew about the advent of Christ, but this proves to be a matter of bagatelle for Justin: from the prophets of the Old Testament. Thus in his *First Apology* LIV, Justin writes:

Those who teach the youth the fairytales made up by poets do not bring any proof for the taught, and we can prove that everything they said was said to deceit and to lead astray the humankind through the instrumentality of evil demons. For knowing from the prophets that Christ the preached one would come and that impious people would be disciplined by fire, they showed that Zeus was also said to have had many sons, thinking that they would make people believe things about Christ were also but a fable, just like the things said by the poets. Such things were said by Greeks and all the other nations, especially where they found out that prophets had prophesized that people would come to believe in Christ. (St Justin 1980, 61-62)

Conversely, the prophecies of the Old Testament – unlike the fantasies of Greco-Latin mythology – fulfill the essential condition of true opinion: they are believed and are taken seriously by the Jews. The only error of the Jews, according to Justin, is that they failed to identify Jesus with the object of these true and correct prophecies. It is an error of recognition, especially serious as they had all the data necessary for such recognition. In the *Apologies*, but especially – on full pages – in his *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin shows how well the prophetic portrait of the Savior overlaps with the real, historical person of Jesus.

The originality of the Christian baptism is saved by Justin the Philosopher by employing the same explicative scheme: to discredit the Christian “bath” or “illumination”, it was spread, under the influence of demons, in pagan temples as specific rituals...

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