Conclusion: Multiple identities in Second century Christianity

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We may strengthen the views propounded in this volume by examining Christian texts which date directly from Hadrian’s time or from its nearest years, and by checking the coherence of the Christians’ self-presentation in these texts within the framework of Hadrian’s religious policy as reconstructed in the preceding pages. Indeed, we cannot rely on a great number of literary witnesses: I will take into consideration Aristides’ Apology (frequently quoted above), the prologue of Justin’s Dialogue with Trypho (probably written in the mid-Second century but explicitly set immediately after the outburst of the Jewish war), and the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch, who was executed at the end of Trajan’s reign – in some ways, his epistolary can help us to understand Christian self-consciousness immediately before Hadrian’s ascent to the throne.

1. Aristides’ Apology: the Christians as tertium genus

As has been frequently stated in these pages, Aristides’ Apology constitutes the first explicit, “public” presentation of a conscious Christian identity as distinguished from other ethnic and religious identities within the Roman Empire. The very complex textual tradition of this work, however, requires a closer examination; we do not possess its original Greek text, with the exception of a few papyrus fragments which are only partially useful for our present purpose. Instead, we have an ancient and authoritative Syriac translation, another partial translation into ancient Armenian, limited to the first two chapters, a kind of extended Greek quotation or paraphrase which was inserted into the Romance of Barlaam and Joasaph – a work attributed to John of Damascus, but probably written in the Tenth century –, and, finally, some fragments in ancient Georgian which come from a hagiographical narrative (as the Romance of Barlaam and Joasaph is also).¹

¹ All the details of the textual problems and the different redactions can be found in Pouderon 2003, to which I refer for further information. Nevertheless, my conclusions are very different from Pouderon’s on the specific issue under discussion. I consider the Syriac translation (quoted as Syr.), the Greek text of the Romance of Barlaam and Joasaph
Aristides builds and structures his Apology by cataloguing the various human races starting from their different cultic practices, and by criticising them from a Christian point of view; he ends with a positive presentation of the Christian faith as the true and correct conception of the deity. The three versions we posses, however, disagree about the number of human races and on their articulation, which is the topic discussed in chapter two of Aristides’ Apology. On the one hand, the Syriac version, along with the Armenian, speaks of four races: Barbarians, Greeks, Jews and Christians. On the other hand, the Greek paraphrase mentions only three races, omitting the names of Barbarians and Greeks, but speaks in general terms of “polytheists” “which venerate a multitude of gods” and subdivides them into Chaldeans, Greeks, and Egyptians. Even the Syriac version, however, follows this scheme in its subsequent development, which criticises the religion of the Barbarians, the Greeks and the Egyptians in the same order. The specific narrative context of the Romance of Barlaam and Joasaph (set at the court of the Indian king, where many astrologers and foretellers were in charge) explains why here Barbarians are substituted by Chaldeans and why astrology is criticised more harshly than in the Syriac redaction. In any case, doubt remains over whether Aristides’ original scheme was ternary or quaternary.

The assumption of the Christians as a third race ( tertium genus) was a commonplace in Second and Third century Christian apologetics, as is well known; a closer examination of the Syriac redaction of Aristides’ text could, however, also confirm that the original scheme was a ternary one, and it could explain how it was subsequently transformed into the quaternary. The Syriac text reads: “It’s clear to you, king, that four races of human beings exist in this world: Barbarians and Greeks, Jews and Christians.” Immediately following this, the Syriac redaction presents the family trees of the Barbarians, Greeks, Jews, and Christians. It is worth noting that in the Greek redaction of the Romance of Barlaam and Joasaph there is, of course, no mention of the genealogies of Barbarians and Greeks, while the family trees of Jews and Christians have been transposed to subsequent chapters, a change made necessary by the insertion of the Chaldeans, which modified the original catalogue of races. But an accurate reading of the genealogies in the Syriac text shows that Barbarians and Greeks share the same descent from Chronos: “The Barbarians, indeed, trace the origin of their kind of religion from Kronos and from Rhea and their other gods; the Greeks, however, from Helenos, who is said

(quoted as Gr.), and the papyrus fragment LondLitt. 223 (2486) (quoted as P2), according to the edition in Pouderon 2003.

2 Arist. Apol. 2, 2 Gr.: οί τούς πολλαπλας σεβόμενοι θεούς εἰς τρία διαιροῦνται γένη, Ἐλληνες καὶ Ἀιγυπτίως.
3 Arist. Apol. 2, 2 Syr.
4 Arist. Apol. 14, 1 Gr. and 15, 1 Gr.
to be sprung from Zeus. And by Helenos there were born Aeolus and Xythos; and there were others descended from Inachos and Phoroneus, and lastly from the Egyptian Danaos and from Kadmos and from Dionysos. The Greeks’ cult to Chronos is confirmed in a subsequent chapter, in which the full genealogy of the Barbarians is reconnected to the cultic activity of the Greeks: “First of all, the Greeks bring forward as a god Kronos, who is translated as Kewan [Saturn]. And his worshippers sacrifice their children to him, and they burn some of them alive in his honour. And they say that he took to him among his wives Rhea, and begat any children by her. By her too he begat Dios, who is called Zeus (…). And after Kronos they bring forward another god Zeus. And they say of him that he assumed the sovereignty, and was king over all the gods”.

A detailed list of the deities worshipped by the Greeks follows this passage. In previous chapters, Barbarians were said to practice the cult of various natural elements (such as sky, earth, water, fire, winds, sun, and moon) and of dead men, without any mention of the deities referred to in their family tree in the introduction (chap. 2 Syr.). Finally, immediately after having dealt with the Greeks, Aristide’s Apology criticises the Egyptian cults, which are defined as “most stupid and wicked of all”.

From this discussion, we can conclude with a fair amount of probability that the original racial scheme used by Aristides has not been fully preserved either by the Syriac version or by the Greek paraphrase. We can suppose that he mentioned three races (Barbarians, Jews and Christians), among which the Barbarians also included Greeks and Egyptians. The Syriac translator was probably misguided by the mention of the Greeks in the family tree of chapter 2 and by the large space devoted to their cults in subsequent chapters. Accordingly, in the opening summary he increased the number of the races to four, omitting the name of the Egyptians which was, however, contained in the list used in the Greek redaction to qualify the primum genus, “the first race”.

Such a reconstruction is not without significance for the general hypothesis propounded in this book. In this way, Aristides’ Apology would be an expression of a Greek vision, to which the internal distinction between Greeks and Barbarians must be traced; however, such a distinction would be reversed in the

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5 Arist. Apol. 2, 2 Syr.
6 Arist. Apol. 9, 1–2 Syr. The Greek text is almost identical: οὕτως παρεισάγεται αὐτοῦς πρὸ πάντων θεῶς ὁ λεγόμενος Κρόνος καὶ τούτω φθούσι τὰ ἱδία τέκνα. δὲ ἐσχε παῖδας πολλοὺς ἐκ τῆς Ρέας καὶ μανας ἱσώθε τὰ ἱδία τέκνα. (…) δεύτερος παρεισάγεται ὁ Ζεὺς ὁν φασί βασιλέως τῶν θεῶν αὐτῶν (…).
7 Arist. Apol. 12, 1 Syr. and Gr.: Αἰγύπτιοι δὲ ἀβελπερώτεροι καὶ ἀφρονέστεροι τούτων ὄντες (…).
oppositional use which characterises it in later Christian writers such as Tatian. Moreover, it must be understood from a point of view which fits well with Roman and, specifically, Hadrian’s philhellenism: within the wide horizon of the Roman Empire, Barbarians (including Romans) and Greeks shared the same descent from Chronos and the same superiority originating in the Greek cultural tradition, especially from philosophy, which is explicitly praised in Aristides’ Apology. Such a superiority is underscored particularly in relation to the Egyptians, with whom the survey of the genera within the Empire ends, in line with the attention paid to Egypt by Hadrian, if not direct connected to one of his journeys there.

Indeed, what matters for Aristides is to distinguish sharply Christians from Jews and to make the first a “third race” which is easily insertable within the ecumenical imperial system by means of the open presentation of their way of life as living philosophical research: “But the Christians, King, while they went about and made search, have found the truth; and as we learned from their writings, they have come nearer to truth and genuine knowledge than the rest of the nations.”

2. Justin’s Dialogue with Trypho and the Jewish revolt

The same idea of wandering in search of the truth and finally finding it in Christianity stands at the centre of the prologue of Justin’s Dialogue with Trypho. Two aspects of this autobiographical report are worth noting: Justin’s remarkable self-presentation as a philosopher and his characterisation of Christianity as the only true philosophy, which can lead to the absolute truth, and the narrative setting of the Dialogue in the years of the Jewish revolt of AD.

Chapters 1 – 9 of Justin’s Dialogue sketch a short intellectual autobiography of the Christian writer; it originated with Justin’s casual meeting with a cultivated Jew, Trypho, and some of his friends. Justin is addressed as a

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8 Who wrote in a very different cultural, political and religious context, in which the irenic attitude of Hadrian’s policy towards Christians was dismissed and substituted by sporadic or more planned persecutions.
9 Arist. Apol. 8, 1 and 13, 1 Syr.; 13, 5 Gr.
10 On the date of Aristides’ Apology and Hadrian’s stay in Athens after the journey to Egypt in 130 see Galimberti’s first paper in this volume.
11 Arist. Apol. 15, 1 Syr. The expression indicating “wandering and searching” appears also in Arist. Apol. 16, 1 Syr.; its authenticity is confirmed by Gr which reports this fragment of the text, and by the Greek paraphrase that reworks and widens the original expression.
philosopher since he was wearing a typical cloak, the *pallium*, which constitutes a sort of uniform for Greek and Roman professional teachers of philosophy. Justin accepts without contradiction the address from his companions and defines his own philosophy at the same time in theological and eudaimonist terms; moreover, he remembers his philosophical career and his unsatisfactory apprenticeship with a Stoic teacher, with a Pythagorean after him, and finally with a Platonist, although for different reasons in each case; only the meeting with an enigmatic ancient sage ends Justin’s philosophical training and makes him adhere to the sole “sure and useful philosophy”, i.e. Christianity.

The words “philosopher”, “philosophy” and “philosophical” appear 26 times in these chapters. The full identification of Christianity as a “philosophical way of life” is confirmed by Justin wearing the robe of a professional philosopher, as has been said, but also by his subsequent career – as witnessed by the acts of his martyrdom. Surely, such self-presentation went further than a simple adherence to a cultural model, as in the wearing of beards by Roman and Greek members of the cultivated elite that we can observe in their portraits. Thus Justin – who was born in Palestine nearby Flavia Neapolis (Sichem) to parents who moved there after the Jewish war in 70, who taught philosophy in Rome and whose fate was to be executed in that city – appears to us as an exemplary case of multiple and articulated identity: a Roman citizen, a Greek-speaking Palestinian, a Christian convert, and a professional philosopher. Scholars have discussed such a complex nexus, especially in relation to the intellectual confrontation between Christianity and classical culture and, more specifically, philosophy; the problem of biblical hermeneutics which the *Dialogue* deals with is also generally taken into consideration within such a framework. However, while the autobiographical report of the prologue has been discussed in detail, far less attention has been devoted to its fictional setting in the years around 135, i.e. at the time of the ‘war suddenly burned in Judea’, which was the focus of the conversation among Trypho’s companions (although Justin doesn’t record its contents) and the cause of Trypho’s condition of exile.

Scholars assume that the narrative context of Justin’s *Dialogue* is fictional and far from its actual redaction, which we can date around 160, on the basis of

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16 Just. *Dial.* 8, 1: (...) ταύτην μόνην εὐρισκον ϕιλοσοφίαν ἄσφαλῆ τε καὶ σύμφωνον.
17 See Rizzi above.
18 Just. *1 Apol.* 1, 1.
20 Just. *Dial.* 9, 3: (...) ἑμβαλόντος τινὸς αὐτῶν λόγον περὶ τοῦ κατὰ τὴν Ἰουδαίαν γενομένου πόλεμου (...).
21 Just. *Dial.* 1, 3.
a passage from the text, which seems to indicate that it has been written after his Apologies, dated around 150. Even if few scholars propound a date closer to the events in 135 for the writing of the Dialogue, such a fictional scenery remains full of significance, and we can say the same of its dedication to a certain Marcus Pompeus, about whom we have no historical information but who must have been a Roman citizen, as shown by his name. The sharing of a probable Roman viewpoint by Justin is confirmed, for instance, by the statement that "the circumcision according to the flesh was given you from Abram onwards as a sign which distinguishes you from us and from other people": here, us can be read as indicating Christians but also, in more general terms, as indicating Greek speaking people or the Romans tout court.

Justin’s statement, according to which the Jews promoted a systematic and well organised defamation campaign against the Christians which charged them with atheism and anomy, appears even more relevant; it is well known from Justin’s Apologies and from other Christian writers of the Second century that such accusations were widespread at various levels in the Roman world. Similar statements frequently recur in Justin’s Dialogue; in the context of a three-way confrontation (Christians and Jews debating before a Roman reader) they seem to be an attempt to remove responsibility for the charges against the Christians from the Roman authorities and to attribute them to Jewish machinations, as in, for example, a cliche we can read in the Martyrdom of Polycarp.

In general, Justin’s Dialogue sketches a picture of Palestinian Judaism as divided against itself, between a permeable position regarding instances from the Christian field – which assumption sheds some light on the problem of the “trueness” of the character Thrypho, who may seem unhistorical at first glance because he is too indulgent to Justin’s observation – and, in contrast, a strongly anti-Christian attitude that is directly connected to persecutory activities by Justin, which he ascribes to the inspirers and actors of Bar Kochba’s revolt.

In such a view, the fictive setting of the Dialogue in the years around 135 reveals its full significance: Justin recreates before the eyes of a Roman observer,

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22 Just. Dial. 120, 6.
26 Marty. of Polyc. 12, 2; 13, 1; 17, 2.
Marcus Pompeus, the dispute he had at the exact moment during Hadrian’s reign when both the writer and his reader were conscious that a decisive religious and political shift had taken place. After the repression of the Diaspora revolts during Trajan’s reign, the possibilities of religious pluralism opened by Hadrian’s policy appeared convincing to a section of the Jews, which was willing to distance itself from the sectarian attitude that caused the Palestinian tragedy of the year 70. If one adopts this hermeneutical key, the Dialogue poses a debate about religious universalism and about whether the Jews or the Christians were its true champions. This is not a merely exegetical problem, it also reveals a decisive point in the self-definition of both religions under the new climate of Hadrian’s reign. It makes plausible also Trypho’s friendly attitude towards his Christian interlocutor and his argument.

So, the argument put by Justin in a decisive moment of the political and religious history of the Empire sets out before Romans the manner in which Christians build their own identity, which no longer excludes ‘any single race of men, whether barbarians, or Greeks, or whatever they may be called, nomads, or vagrants, or herdsmen living in tents’

3. Ignatius of Antioch: cities and churches in competition for prestige

Modern scholars generally agree on the authenticity of seven letters from Ignatius of Antioch’s epistolary corpus and date them to the second decade of the Second century. They witness Ignatius’ effort to foster the model of monarchical episcopacy in the Asian churches and to substitute the pre-existing structures based on a college of presbyters; moreover, Ignatius’ opponents are generally

27 Just. Dial. 117, 5: οὐδὲ γὰρ ἄλος ἔστι τι γένος ἀνθρώπων, ἡτε βαρβάρον ἡτε Ἑλλήνων ἡτε ἁπλῶς ὑπειρασμὶ ὑπονομῇ προσαγωγοφαιομένων, ἢ ἀμαξαβίων ἢ ἀοίκων καλομεμένων ἢ ἐν σκήπταις κτιστηρίδων ὑκτόντων (...).

28 The composition date of the Acts of the Apostles has become a matter of lively scholarly debate over the last few years; a hypothetical dating to within or immediately before Hadrian’s reign would well accord with the reflections I make here; see for instance Pervo 2006 and Nasrallah 2008. But the use of Acts to support my position would require an updated discussion here and since there is no explicit scholarly consensus about it I prefer not emphasise such an hypothesis. Perhaps also this book could offer some further material to better locate the redaction of Acts.

29 Text and notes in Ayán Calvo 1991. Brent 2006 offers a treatment of Ignatius’ letters with an approach that is close to mine in part.
characterised on theological and doctrinal grounds as docetist and Judaising. In my opinion, Ignatius’ letters seem also to echo the deep-rooted and everlasting competition for prestige among the prominent Asian cities, especially the strong rivalry between Ephesus and Smyrna about which we are well informed by epigraphic, archaeological and literary sources and especially by the contemporary production of the writers of the Second Sophistic. A closer analysis of the address formulae which open Ignatius’ letters should confirm such an assertion 30.

Writing to the community in Ephesus and also to that in Rome, Ignatius is over-abundant in words of praise and celebration; he uses terms such as μεγάλος 31 or μεγαλότης 32 only in the case of these two cities, and he has recourse to an embarrassing series of superlatives in the letter addressed to the Christians in the Capital. We are very well informed due to a mass of epigraphic evidence about the frequently grotesque competition among Asian poleis for obtaining such titles from this or that political authority; therefore, it is impossible not to formulate the hypothesis that Ignatius is transposing the lexicon and conventions of contemporary rhetoric and political life to the Christian domain. If this were so, we must provisionally conclude that the self-comprehension of the Christian communities addressed by Ignatius was still involved in the problem of the self-representation of Greek cities within the general framework of imperial civilisation during his time, thus the identity of a Christian community was strictly connected to the municipal one, forging a link between religious and civic community which was felt as constitutive rather than accidental, also by Christians.

This statement could be confirmed by the anachronistic epithet “celebrated in the centuries” referring to the Ephesians Church 33 (which was at best eight decades old), and by a symmetrical examination of the concluding greetings of Ignatius’ letters. Any sign to other Asian cities is missing in the epistle to the Ephesians, and the fact that Ignatius wrote it in Smyrna is only revealed by a hint to Polycarp, but the latter is not qualified as a bishop 34. The greetings to Magnesians, also written in Smyrna, are proffered by Ignatius on behalf of Ephesians Christians; he mentions Polycarp as a bishop, while the other cities

30 See also Rizzi 2006, 53–54.
31 Ign. Eph. inscriptio.
32 Ign. Rom. inscriptio.
33 Ign. Eph. 8, 1: διαβοήτου τοῦ αἰῶνος. It’s impossible to see here a reference to the eons of the Jewish or Gnostic terminology, which is totally foreign to Ignatius.
34 Ign. Eph. 21, 1: Ἀντίφημον ὑμῶν ἐγώ καὶ ὁ ἐπέμψατε εἰς θεοῦ τιμήν εἰς Σμύρναν, ὅθεν καὶ γράφω ὑμῖν, εὐχαριστῶν τῷ κυρίῳ, ἁγαπῶν Πολύκαρπον ὡς καὶ ὑμᾶς.
inhabited by Christians are mentioned in generic terms; Smyrnaeans and Ephesians are associated in Christ’s love by Ignatius’ greetings to the Trallians and also in the person of Burrus, who was sent by both churches to bestow honours on Ignatius in the Troad region, from where the latter writes to Philadelphians. Ignatius’ letter to the Romans was to be dispatched by some Ephesians called, in superlative terms, ἀξιομακάριστοι; finally, writing to Smyrnaeans from the Troad region, Ignatius associates them to Burrus with ‘your brothers’ Ephesians, thereby recommending that ὁμόνοια could spill over from the community’s internal relations to the mutual partnership of the two churches.

In short, Ignatius appears very attentive in attributing the importance according to circumstances and opportunities and the deserved rank of each city and community – in the precise place assigned by the ancient epistolary praxis to a well-defined formulary function; we can note also the clear prevalence of Ephesus, with which Smyrna is associated only in those cases in which Ignatius could presume the inhabitants of the latter would have known the contents of his letters since they were addressed to them or transmitted by people known to them.

This is the context in which Ignatius insists on diffusing and making Christian communities accept his ternary hierarchical structure made up of bishop, presbyters, and deacons, within which the one bishop is ‘an image of the Father’; frequently in his letters Ignatius emphasises the necessity for Christians to do nothing without the presence or authorisation of the bishop, especially on the liturgical level, in a clear hint of the difficulties and resistances which Ignatius’ ecclesiastical model faced and which he considered as worrisome as the doctrinal deviations considered above.

This is not the place to examine further the issue of the origin and development of the monarchic episcopate during the Second century but perhaps we can formulate a suggestive question: if such a hierarchical model for structuring Christian communities had been theorised by Ignatius almost

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36 Ign. Trall. 12, 1. 13, 1: Ἀσπάζομαι ὡμᾶς ἀπὸ Σμύρνης ἁμα ταῖς συμπαράστασις μοι ἐκκλησίας τοῦ θεοῦ, οἱ κατὰ πάντα με ἀνέπαυσαν σαρκὶ τε καὶ πνεύματι. (...) Ἀσπάζομαι ὑμᾶς ἡ ἀγάπη Σμυρναίων καὶ Ἐφέσιων.

37 Ign. Phil. 11, 2: Ἀσπάζομαι ὡμᾶς ἡ ἀγάπη τῶν ἀδελφῶν τῶν ἐν Τρολλί, ὅθεν καὶ γράφω ὑμῖν διά Βούρρου πεμφθέντος ἁμα ἐμοὶ ἀπὸ Ἐφέσιων καὶ Σμυρναίων εἰς λόγον τιμῆς.

38 Ign. Rom. 10, 1: Γράφω δὲ ὑμῖν ταῦτα ἀπὸ Σμύρνης δι’ Ἐφέσιων τῶν ἀξιομακαριστῶν.

39 On Ignatius’ concept of ὁμόνοια see Brent 2006, 231–308, with whom, however, I do not agree on every aspect.

40 Ign. Trall. 3, 1: (...) ὡς καὶ τὸν ἐπίσκοπον ὄντα τύπον τοῦ πατρός (...).
and it spread out irreversibly in the second half of the Second century and the first decades of the Third – even before its own full theoretical definition and the elaboration of a coherent terminology that we find only in the *Apostolic tradition*, in Tertullian, and in Cyprian during the Third century – is it really possible to explain or even understand Ignatius’ model without presuming any form of relation with the Roman model of a monarchic Empire including cultural, religious, and ethnical diversities which was first outlined by Trajan, begun by Hadrian, fully established by subsequent emperors, and rhetorically and ideologically illustrated by Aelius Aristides’ *Encomium of Rome*?\(^41\)

The same Ignatius acknowledged the difficult acceptance of his hierarchical model in his own community when, while leaving his own city in chains he admitted that ‘the church of Syria (…) has God as shepherd in my place. Only Jesus Christ will be its bishop and your love’\(^42\). Perhaps it was not fortuitous that the mono-episcopal model began spreading from the Greek cities of Asia Minor, foremost in celebrating the imperial cult during the years from Trajan and Hadrian through to Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius, a period judged as fully favourable by the entire Christian tradition. If this were true, Constantine in his claim to be emperor and apostle would not be the hero of a historical watershed, but merely the unintended heir of Hadrian’s political-theological innovation.

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41 Hübner 1997 and Lechner 1999 argue that Ignatius’ letters are a forgery from mid-Second century; this assumption would be perfectly fitting with the reflections I propose here. Since there is no full acceptance of their hypothesis by scholars, however, I maintain the traditional date, as I do about the composition date of the *Acts of the Apostles* (see note 28 above).