CHRISTIANITY AND THE WORLD IN THE LETTER TO DIOGNETUS: INFERENCE FOR CONTEMPORARY ECCLESIAL EXPERIENCE

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Abstract: The author explores chapters five and six of the Letter to Diognetus for a traditional alternative to the problematic attitudes regarding secular society that occur in contemporary Christianity. Thus he reiterates the challenge launched by Marrou more than sixty years ago, which is to infer from the Letter – beyond its immediate import for early Christians – guidelines for the contemporary ecclesial experience. The article addresses the immediate context and character of the text, progressing to an analysis of the two chapters, and ends by highlighting the relevance of this information for contemporary Christianity. The article adds to current Diognetian studies by identifying as yet ignored traces of it in later Christian literature.

The variances between Late Antiquity and secular society notwithstanding, the challenges entailed by the Christian experience within the world of today do not differ significantly from those faced by the earliest Christian generations. This is what makes the latters’ perceptions relevant to us and, indeed, their wisdom still inspires solutions for contemporary impasses. One such issue, discussed below, is the possibility of adopting a genuinely Christian lifestyle within the secular city. Given the contradictory Christian attitudes toward the secular framework, oscillating between its overall rejection and its uncritical acceptance, this possibility seems remote. Such tendencies will not constitute, however, the object of the following analysis. Instead, given that it addressed similar concerns,1 herein I shall explore the Letter to Diognetus, an apologetic tract whose fifth and sixth chapters treat the challenging condition of Christians in society and their divine assignment as contributors to the general wellbeing.

Whilst recent studies, like Judith Lieu’s article,2 highlight the significance of the two chapters for the identity of early Christians, my goal is to show the relevance of their wisdom for today. In the process, I shall apply a corrective to Lieu’s notion of a Christian ‘meta-identity’ construed as culturally inclusive, because Diognetus (as the text will be referred to hereafter) points to a theological identity that transcends cultural categories. That said, although I shall often refer to Ioan Ică Jr.’s analysis3 of Christianity’s failure to implement the Diognetian program, my interests do not coincide with his. After his meticulous diachronic enquiry, Ică discussed aspects pertaining to an institutional integration of Christianity and society within the new

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Europe; my article will focus instead on the personal level and the implementation of the Christian ethos in the everyday life. Without an existential assimilation of the Diognetian project, no establishment, like the historic utopias analysed by Ică, seems capable to withstand the pressure of circumstantial vicissitudes. This does not mean that I prefer some disembodied version of the Christian ethos. Whilst addressing the existential dimension I will prove the unhistorical utopia of Abraham van de Beek as parallel to the ideals espoused by Diognetus. Indeed, the latter’s message does not share either the patterns of a pluralistic society which never actually came into being or the evasionist solution proposed by van de Beek, who pictured a Christian community dwelling outside of time and space. Apart from his courageous denouncement of the secular fundamentalism of our times, the Christian ethos depicted by him is not that of Diognetus.

In addressing this topic, I pay tribute to the greatest interpreter of Diognetus in the last century, Henri-Irénée Marrou, who both highlighted its relevance to contemporary circumstances and invited further reflection upon its worth. In the course of this analysis, I shall point to some similarities between Diognetus and other patristic texts, which show that – contrary to what is believed – this enigmatic writing was not totally forgotten within tradition. Its traces can be discerned in the Macarian Homilies and, possibly, in the Ladder of St John Climacus.

A Context to the Letter to Diognetus

Early Christians faced challenges that were related to their own specificity and/or identity. Construing themselves as bearers of divine wisdom, in the Pauline sense (1 Corinthians 1:20-24), and as citizens of God’s kingdom, Christians refused assimilation with both Jews and the Gentiles (cf. Galatians 3:28) and consequently were perceived from the outset as foreigners. As a matter of fact they (re)presented themselves, in the words of Diognetus, as a ‘new race or way of life’ which was not defined by blood, culture and ethnicity, embracing therefore the status of a third nation or race, so counted after Jews and Gentiles. The phrase ‘third nation,’ whilst missing from the writing of interest here, appears both in the Apology of Aristides and the apocryphal Peter’s Message; in all likelihood the Message being a common source for Aristides and Diognetus. As such, Christians started to be seen not just as different but also as a challenge to the establishment and to everyone, both Jews and Gentiles. Innumerable martyrs have answered for this perception with their own lives. Others, like the apologists, jeopardised their career and social standing by writing in defence of their co-religionists. Diognetus, to which I now turn, is a historical witness of this attitude, where we find a complex understanding of the ‘new race’ as both foreign and immanent to any given context.

This anonymous work whose critical edition is still in the making, is in fact an address or exhortation, and not an epistle. It belongs to the apologetic genre, and was supposedly drafted in the second half of the second century or early third century. According to contemporary scholars, later Christian tradition did not know of this anonymous work. For example, Ehrman stated that the Letter was ‘never mentioned, let alone cited, by any of the church Fathers.’ Although I agree with the lack of references to this writing, I contest the opinion of a total ignorance toward Diognetus on grounds of the striking similarities between its discourse
in chapters 5 and 6, of immediate interest here, and the Fifth Spiritual Homily attributed to St Macarius. This will be discussed below. In the only manuscript ever found of this writing, apparently from the thirteenth century, the ten genuine chapters (followed by two more chapters, added from a homily on the revelation of God’s Son and the paradise narrative in Genesis 2) address the crucial question of how to communicate the Christian message to outsiders. The manuscript was discovered in 1436 and published in 1592.

Diogonet is a polemical text aiming to defend Christianity against false accusations, together with denouncing the decadence of heathen culture and the sterile practices of contemporary Judaism. Its goal was to persuade the recipient, a certain Diogonet, to become a Christian. According to the suggestions contained in the text, the recipient, very likely a pagan interested in Christianity (if not a fictional character), was still sensible to the various accusations formulated against Christians by default. To dismantle his misrepresentations of the Christian faith and lifestyle, the author of the tract, known to posterity as Μαθητής (the Disciple), undertook to convince him otherwise. The full extent of the argument – though very learned and instructive, and inspirational at times – is not of interest here. Nevertheless, two chapters in Diogonet are of particular relevance to our topic, namely the fifth and the sixth. These chapters constitute a coherent unity, the first stressing the paradoxical state of Christians living within a pagan world, whereas the second points out the providential role played by them in the midst of society. In the following pages, I shall consider in more detail the two chapters, looking for the articulation of the Christian lifestyle as presented therein.

In the world, but not of this world
The heading of this section paraphrases a sentence from chapter six, which encapsulates the genial perception of the author regarding the Christian condition: ‘Christians dwell in the world (ἐν κόσμῳ) but are not of the world (ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου).’ Depicted with both prudence and boldness, the Christian lifestyle or polity constitutes the central theme of the chapters under consideration here. The Disciple seemingly attempted to forestall the pagan allegations that Christians were anti-social, by eventually emphasising the superiority of the latters’ ethos to pagan beliefs and customs. From the onset, indeed, the author pointed out how Christians are not automatically and indiscriminately against the world, the broader society or contemporary culture. We read that Christians do not cultivate the fact of being different – at least regarding the external aspects of their lives. In the author’s own words,

Christians do not differ (διακεκριμένοι) from the rest of people by place, or language, or their habits. For nowhere do they dwell in cities of their own, nor do they employ some unusual language, nor do they practice a strange lifestyle (βίον παράσημον).

Apart from the terminological variances, the fifth Macarian homily reiterates the idea of the above passage: ‘the difference (ἄλλοιώσις) of Christians does not
consist in outward (ἐξωτέροις) forms and signs.\textsuperscript{29} The sentence brings to further clarity the opening assertion of the same homily, which echoes \textit{Diognetus} even more: ‘The world of Christians is different (ἐξερος), and their behaviour (διαγωγή), mindset (νοῦς), manner of speech (λόγος), and action (πράξεις), happen to be different [to those of worldly people].\textsuperscript{30} The only divergences from \textit{Diognetus} occur in the theme of a different ‘world of Christians’ (ὁ τῶν Χριστιανῶν κόσμος ἑτερός ἐστι), a phrase which in light of the ensuing specifications refers to ethos, and the idea of a different ‘manner of speech,’ which should be taken as a distinguished use of language. The author of the homily meant that both Christian discourse and behaviour illustrate ‘the peace of Christ,’ ‘the love of the Spirit’ and a state of serenity (ἀταραξίαν) or independence from worldly worries,\textsuperscript{31} indeed aspects that cannot be reduced to ‘outward forms and signs.’ Interestingly, the problematic discussed by \textit{Diognetus}, of the relationship between Christians and the heathen world was transformed by the Macarian homilies into a comparison between true and false Christians. Being influenced by the worldly mind, the latter are obsessed with external forms.\textsuperscript{32} This approach evokes the stances against religious formalism in \textit{Diognetus} 4.1.\textsuperscript{33}

Returning to \textit{Diognetus}, we read that as ‘followers of the customs’ pertaining to the countries of their dwelling,\textsuperscript{34} Christians participate in all the outward aspects of everyday life together with their heathen compatriots. Contrary to the pagan suspicions of separationist propensities, reiterated by van de Beek’s interpretation of the letter as promoting a radically decontextualised Christian ethos,\textsuperscript{35} the phrase ‘followers of the customs’ and the accompanying examples (cf. \textit{Diognetus} 5.1-2) prove that Christians belong to the broader social context; their immanence as it were. Christians maintain their lifestyle without evading society, irrespective of how decadent the latter might be. More a school or community than a religion,\textsuperscript{36} Christians are therefore not \textit{une secte excentrique}, as Marrou noted.\textsuperscript{37} Similarly, Lieu observed correctly: ‘Social separation is not a Christian characteristic.’\textsuperscript{38} Looking for refuge outside the world could not be an option for a militant Church, whose purpose in history is to change the stone heart of humankind into a living one, as posited by Clement the Alexandrian\textsuperscript{39} a little later, if not in the very time of the Disciple. What matters here is that Christians do not manifest their difference or their ‘supernatural life’\textsuperscript{40} in an ostentatious fashion. Christian godliness remains unseen (ἀόρατος δὲ αὐτῶν ἢ θεοσέβεια μένει),\textsuperscript{41} hidden like the soul within a body; religion is first and foremost an interiorised commitment to Christ. I shall return to this metaphor in the next section.

On this note, let us consider more closely the characteristics of the Christian lifestyle. The Disciple noted:

\begin{quote}
Whilst living both in Greek and barbarian cities, depending on their lot, and following the local customs in regards to clothing, food and the other aspects of life, they [i.e. Christians] display, however, an astonishing and admittedly paradoxical (θαυμαστὴν καὶ ὁμολογουμένως παράδοξον) condition of their way of life (τὴν κατάστασιν τῆς έαυτῶν πολιτείας).\textsuperscript{42}
\end{quote}

From this point onwards, the Disciple built an antithesis between Christian behaviour and its heathen counterpart. We can still see in the above citation that what differentiates Christians from pagans is not the external features. Nevertheless, the author made no compromise regarding the uniqueness of the Christian polity, the
spirit motivating it and its uncommon traits. Lieu discerned in this context two nuances entailed by the notion of *politeia*,


which she believed could be considered as foundational for identity. More precisely, there is the ‘internal self-identity, clearly defined and separate’ of Christians and the ‘external, observed identity,’ characterised by ‘a lack of visible differentiation,’ both aspects contributing toward a ‘highly articulated meta-identity.’

She further proposed that in its complex makeup within which one could trace elements pertaining to earlier cultural backgrounds, this meta-identity would prove that the usual view of Christian distinctiveness as excluding ‘earlier dichotomies’ like Jew vs. Gentile, does not stand as such. Although I agree partially with this assertion, I believe that Lieu’s appraisal of *Diogonetos* illustrates more our contemporary mentality than a conscious effort on the part of its anonymous author. Labouring towards convincing his interlocutor of the superiority of the Christian ethos over its counterparts, the Disciple could not have left room for inclusivism. To apply the concept of meta-identity here would require therefore defining it from the zenithal point of the notion of transcendence and not along the lines of contemporary inclusivism, as we shall see immediately.

For the Disciple, the main difference between Christians and irreligious people consisted in the fact that, whilst the pagan lifestyle fleshed out ‘the thought and reflection of people burdened with many worries,’ the Christian mentality did not draw upon ‘human opinion.’ A similar antithesis referred to Christian godliness and the ‘idle pursuit and arrogance of the Jews.’ There is no inclusivism here. Again, this perception was later rehearsed by the Macarian homilies, which contrasted ‘the whole race of humankind’ and its ‘vain thoughts’ to Christians who, driven by their participation in the Spirit (διὰ τὴν μετουσίαν καὶ μετοχὴν τοῦ Πνεύματος τοῦ ἅγιου), ‘dwell in a heavenly mindset’ (ἐν τῷ οὐρανίῳ φρονήματι τυχόνειν). Regarding the source of this wisdom, the Disciple would have pointed to the Logos of God, like in *Diogonetos* 7.1-2, but the idea remains the same. Given this divine term of reference, one could not expect therefore to learn from irreligious people about Christians and particularly ‘the mystery of their specific godliness’ (τὸ δὲ τῆς ἱδίας αὐτῶν θεοσεβείας μυστήριον), as stated at the end of chapter four. What matters here is that, being at variance with the spirit of this world, Christian polity is


theological in nature, and that it participates in the transcendent character of divine wisdom. Thence the paradox: although Christians are geographically and historically localised, their mindset and lifestyle are never bound by the categories of space, time, ethnicity, culture and language. They are a new race, entirely remade by the creator and saviour of the universe, and thus not of this world. Existentially free, no matter how strange this might sound today, they are above any narrow frame of reference, like God himself; they are atopical and cosmopolitan. This understanding is famously summarised by an Athonite adage, which goes like this: ‘what matters is not the place; it is the manner.’ Crucified between heaven and earth, Christians transcend the here and now, their immediate context. Possibly alluding to this Athonite wisdom, Icā observed with reference to *Diogonetos*:
The difference between them [i.e., Christians] and the world rests on modality and not on spatiality or temporality; therefore it depends on the tropos not on the topos or the chronos. Christians are neither elsewhere nor in another time; they do not actualise their status of God’s children through grace either beyond here or in the future, but in the here and now, although behaving in a different way than all others. 51

The Disciple pointed this out emphatically.

Although living in their countries, they are like foreigners (πάροικοι); they participate in everything as citizens (πολίται) but endure all things as strangers (ξένοι). Any foreign country is theirs (πάσα ξένη πατρίς ἐστιν αὐτῶν) and for them any homeland is foreign (πάσα πατρίς ξένη). 52

This status of to-be-there-but-not-to-belong-anywhere, a paradox of non-localisation characteristic to the Christian journey, echoes the words of the Lord in John 17:14-16 and other scriptural passages, as pointed out by Florovsky and Lieu. 53 In turn, Tanner saw behind this paradox allusions to the Stoic ‘universal world society’ and the Epicurean need to ‘live in hiding.’ 54 Whether biblical or philosophical in origin, or rather both, this depiction points to a dramatic tension that is best captured by the following statement: Christians ‘reside on earth but their polity is in heaven (ἐν υἱονόμῳ πολιτεύονται).’ 55 This statement should not be considered in terms of some evasionist propensities, as discussed above. Somehow

sharing in God’s own perplexing state of being everywhere though never bound by space, Christians exhibit their strangeness through their different lifestyle in the here and now. Marrou rendered this aspect in penetrating words: La situation des Chrétiens dans le monde implique une synthèse d’immanence et de transcendence (‘the status of Christians in the world entails a synthesis of immanence and transcendence’). 56 The Disciple exemplified this paradoxical experience by reasserting the dissimilarity in practical terms that evoked the common charges of immorality levelled against Christians. ‘ Dwelling in the flesh but not living according to the flesh’ (ἐν σαρκί τυγχάνουσιν, ἀλλ’ ὦ κατὰ σάρκα ζῶσιν), 57 Christians marry (γαμοῦσιν) and have children (τεκνογονοῦσιν) like all do yet they neither destroy their offspring nor share their spouses. 58 In other words, the proximity of the world and the sharing in the natural rhythms of life do not preclude Christians from fully affirming their identity – despite their being misunderstood, marginalised or even persecuted and put to death. 60 Danger and repression could not make legitimate either the abandonment of the Christian lifestyle – which in our own time would take the form of surrendering to secularism – or the evasionist tendencies and pleas for civil rights, as we see in van de Beek’s article. 61 For Diognetus, Christian identity is inextricably linked to martyrdom.

The likeness to God implied by the text is not reducible however to the aspect of strangeness. The Disciple continued by pointing out that Christians contribute to the wellbeing of the world precisely given their ‘transcendence’ to the worldly ways. In fact, and furthermore, not only do they abide by the laws but by their conduct and compassion for all, through which they resemble God, 62 they surpass (νικῶσι, lit. vanquish) any law. 63 It is unfortunate that when addressing the theme of Christians exceeding pagan standards, Lieu referred only to Diognetus 5.7 and contended that Christian virtues, and the idea of a heavenly politeia, would draw on their Jewish
counterparts. This point clarifies her earlier intimation of the inclusive character of the Christian meta-identity: she intended to say that the Christian lifestyle was neither as new nor as paradoxical as the author of Diognetus wanted the reader to believe, and that Judaism should not be discarded as a root of this lifestyle. It is obvious that Christianity cannot 

claim absolute novelty: the early apologetics often noticed the continuity between worthwhile aspects of humanity’s pre-Christian experience and the Christian renovation of the values. Very likely, the author highlighted the superior lifestyle of Christians in order to reach out to Diognetus and convince him to embrace Christianity; one should not overlook the exhortatory nature of the writing. That said, one cannot understand how Lieu missed the manifestation of love and compassion as concrete marks of the Christian experience, so emphatically affirmed by Diognetus: Christians ‘love everybody (ἀγαπῶσι πάντας) and are persecuted by all,’ ‘they do good (ἀγαθοποιοῦντες) and are punished as evildoers.’ These assertions reached a climax in the portrait – Hellenistic, yes, but no less Christian – of the benefactor as becoming a god for those that receive alms (θεὸς γίνεται τῶν λαμβανόντων) and as an imitator of God (μιμητὴς ἐστι θεοῦ). Symptomatically, the words love and compassion are nowhere to be found in Lieu’s article. This absence may further explain why she found obscurity and ambiguities, the signs of a forgery, in the Diognetian articulation of Christian ‘self-identity.’

Of interest here is the fact that, hated by the world as the flesh hates the soul, and being challenged by their nearness to irreligious people, Christians have the opportunity to progress spiritually – like the soul that betters (βελτιοῦται) itself by taking the ascetic path – and manifest the superiority of their lifestyle to the ethos of the secular city. For the Disciple, the clear sign of this progress was the increase in numbers of Christians, in spite of all adversity. These notes lead into the next topic concerning the Christian task in the world. Before moving any further it is noteworthy that Christian identity as presented by Diognetus cannot be dissociated from what is usually called mystical theology, a view of things which, far from attempting to make sense of God in human terms, undertakes to interpret human life in the light of God. By establishing this transcendent frame of reference for the ecclesial experience, which makes it recognisable beyond its fleeting forms in history, the Diognetian portrait of the Christian remains relevant through the centuries.

The soul of this world
Apart from the paradoxical statements considered above, Diognetus addresses the relationship between Christians and their context through a psychosomatic analogy, which Marrou considered as unique in early Christian literature. For the Disciple, ‘in the world, Christians are what the soul is in the body’ (ὁπερ ἐστιν ἐν σώματι ψυχή, τούτοις ἐστιν ἐν κόσμῳ Χριστιανοῖ). This analogy is contemplated in two ways. First, there is a negative meaning associated with it, which will emerge soon after the following notes on presence and difference. Since they inhabit many places – lit. cities, πόλεις – around the world, Christians are geographically everywhere as the soul wholly pervades – ἐξασπάται, ‘is scattered into’ – the body. Whilst continuing with the analogy, the Disciple rehearsed ideas better illustrated by the fifth chapter,
namely, of difference and strangeness, which relate to the virtuous and compassionate
drives of Christians. Just as a soul cannot be confounded with its own body, they do
not indistinctively merge with the world in which they live: ‘Christians inhabit the
world but are not of the world.’ Despite their vicinity therefore, the difference
remains. Here the theme of strangeness emerges more dramatically than before. The
Disciple borrowed a Pythagorean-Platonic stance, of the soul scattered and held
captive in the body, to assert that Christians are in the world as if arrested (κατέχονται) in a ward (ός ἐν φρουρᾷ). This gloomy perception was certainly
motivated by the spectre of pagan persecutions—a reality suggested by the metaphor
of ‘the body [that] hates and makes war to the soul.’ The Disciple also attested this
openly, ‘the world hates Christians’ and ‘Christians are persecuted everyday.’
Second, there is a positive connotation associated with this analogy. Christians are the
soul of the world by fulfilling a similar function in regards to the broader society.
More precisely, as the body receives life from the soul, Christians give life to, and
literally preserve, the world (αὐτὸι δὲ συνέχουσι τὸν κόσμον). This statement brings
to clarity an earlier assertion concerning Christians who, their poverty
notwithstanding, can enrich many. The dialectic of the soul which remains different
from, yet active within the body, brings to culmination the paradox of the Christian
life as contemplated in chapter five, an aspect captured by Icā.

The paradoxical citizenship of Christians unifies therefore within the cruciform figure
of an antinomy, the interior and the exterior, the vertical and the horizontal,
transcendence and immanence, heaven and earth, contemplation and action, mystical
[vision] and [practical] involvement. The psychophysical image points out with clarity
the impossibility of all disjunctive and unilateral options, which are equally ‘heretical’
and mutilating.

Operating within a holistic framework, the Disciple transformed the pessimistic
concept of imprisonment by acknowledging the active role of both the soul in the
body and of Christians in society. Marrou highlighted this positive reinterpretation by
showing that Christians act in the world like a divine principle or a providential
factor. More precisely, Christians appear comme l’équivalent d’une âme cosmique
(‘like the equivalent of a cosmic soul’). This vivifying function entails two more
nuances.

First, when speaking of the role of Christians as eco-systemic agents who
preserve the world, a task assigned by God, seems to suggest a mystical
influence exercised by their being there. Their presence infuses life into the body of
the world; they sustain the cosmos in existence and, one would say, bless it through
their immanence, as illustrated by the saying ‘the human being sanctifies the place’
from the Romanian unwritten lore. This holy function appears, interestingly, like a
special case of the participatory variant of the strong anthropic principle, which
postulates the ontological function of human presence in the universe. What matters
is that reverberations of the phrase αὐτοὶ δὲ συνέχουσι τὸν κόσμον occurred, in
similar words, in St John Climacus, who perceived the ‘energy’ of prayer as the
‘support of the world’ (κόσμου σύστασις). Could this be another patristic echo of
Diogenetus, alongside the Macarian homilies, or does it reflect a general understanding
of the Christian presence in the world – better illustrated for example by the saintly
examples of the Spiritual Meadow – which the Letter happened to encapsulate in such
vibrant tones? Given the scarce information at our disposal, it is difficult to answer.
Without providing details and without connecting this theme with Climacus, Icà maintained that a clear understanding of Christians as preventing the destruction of the world through their prayers appeared in St Justin Martyr’s Second Apology 7.1, and that in the fourth century the theme was rehearsed in a narrower sense, as the prayer of the monks, in a letter by St Serapion of Thmuis.  

Nevertheless, and in a second instance, this comparison with the views of Climacus (which although spiritual in nature are not as mystical as the inference concerning the impact of the Christian presence in the world) leads to a more practical aspect of the mission appointed to Christians. This task is termed as love for the world or literally compassion for ‘those that hate them.’ It is through love that Christians counteract the destructive factor represented by hatred, and thus they accomplish their divinely-assigned mission, from which they do not dare resign. This sense of duty makes them God’s conscious and active agents in the world. The mystical dimension does not exclude therefore a practical side of Christian immanence, which justifies Icà’s observation that in light of Diognetus 6 the aim of the whole Christian undertaking is the establishment of a ‘Kingdom of God which is both an inner reality and a socio-cosmic one.’

Here, chapter six meets the final idea expounded by the fifth one, and both seem to anticipate the change of heart of the Empire regarding Christians, which occurred in the early fourth century. Together with their new status, the presence of Christians and their activity were construed as quintessential to the consolidation of the State. Icà observed that this shift was not without downturns, and that both East and West failed the Diognetian project by causing a schism between mundane activities and the spiritual life. The project remains therefore a sacred task – which cannot be completed without historical realism, like in the assertions of van de Beek. Nevertheless, given the failure of all institutional attempts to implement this program, in light of the Disciple’s wisdom the most suitable approach would be to address the co-existence of Christians and the broader society, on a personal level.

**Concluding remarks**

The Letter to Diognetus addresses aspects of the ecclesial experience, painting a Christian’s portrait that is relevant irrespective of time and space. Thus, it represents an important source for the rediscovery of true ecclesial specificity, mainly regarding the complex interactions of the Church and its broader context. Marrou believed that the image of Christians as the soul of a body is not only fortunate and expressive; it is more so fecund and inspirational.

The nuanced approach of the Disciple entailed a conundrum: if Christians are different to this world, what could they do to preserve their identity? Furthermore, in keeping their identity intact, how would they properly interact with the world? Immune to the dichotomies opposing mundane activities and the spiritual life – with the downgrading of the former and the idealisation of the latter – the Disciple proposed an alternative that was both holistic and paradoxical. In it there can be discerned scriptural and philosophical echoes yet it ultimately built on the paradigm
of the incarnation, an aspect treated here only implicitly. This alternative, which consisted in the appraisal of Christians as agents of the crucified Logos, can be summed up as follows: apart from being different, they are never against the world even though the world is against them. What empowers them is the Christlike embrace of their paradoxical condition, of living in a given context without exclusively belonging to it. Only thus, lovingly, can they undertake the next step – of becoming active contributors to the spiritual health and wellbeing of the world. After centuries of Christendom, contemporary Christians face similar dilemmas, which they attempt to address either by evading society or by assimilation. It is these specific circumstances that should bring this writing to our attention, more than had been the case in earlier generations. However, although Diognetus offers viable solutions to our impasses, their implementation is impossible without further nuancing the entire problematic and without the awareness that Christianity is after all an interiorised commitment to Christ.

There is nothing ‘remarkably opaque,’ as Lieu insisted, in the genuinely apostolic insight of the Disciple, an insight touching on the very essence of the Christian mindset, which ‘solves’ its paradoxes not by simplifications but through the cruciform wisdom evoked by Ică. This approach should be brought back to the heart of the Christian mission and pastoral work.

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NOTES:

3 Cf. n.1 above.
Lieu, ‘The Forging of Christian Identity,’ 183-84, 186; Johannes Quasten, Patrology, vol. 1 (Westminster: Christian Classics Inc., 1986), 193. The theme of a gradual process that led to the ‘third race,’ without the phrase being used, seems to have been reiterated by St Gregory the Theologian in Oration 31.25 (PG 36, 160D-161B). Nazianzen scholars might be interested in tracing his depiction back to such earlier sources.


Cf. Spiritual Homilies 5.1-4 (PG 34, 493D-497D).


On the circumstances of its discovery and publication, see Otto Bardenhewer, Patrology: The Lives and Works of the Fathers of the Church, trans. from the second edition by Thomas J. Shanhan (Freiburg im Breisgau and St Louis, MO: B. Herder, 1908), 68-69; Ehrman, ‘Introduction,’ 127-28; Foster, ‘The
Epistle to Diognetus,’ 162-63; Humphries, Early Christianity, 80; Tanner, ‘The Epistle to Diognetus,’ 496-97.


20 Cf. Tanner, ‘The Epistle to Diognetus,’ 499-500. His entire article discusses the various philosophical echoes within the tract.

21 The passages from chapter 5 cited herein are translated under my supervision by a group of students of St Andrew’s Greek Orthodox Theological College (Sydney), namely, Theodoros Dimitriou, Leonidas Ioannou, William Le Couilliard and Efstratios Makris. The responsibility for the final version falls entirely on me; I also translated the relevant passages from other chapters. For a detailed analysis of chapters 5 and 6 see Marrou, ‘Commentaire,’ 119-76.

22 Diogonet 6.3 (Ehrman, 142).

23 Diogonet 5.4 (Ehrman, 140). Tanner, ‘The Epistle to Diognetus,’ 502, rejects the usual translation, ‘citizenship.’


25 Spiritual Homilies 5.4 (PG 34, 497C).


27 Here I followed Ehrman (140), which gives ἔθεσις (customs, habits). I purposely translated it as ‘habits,’ which can be taken as both customs and clothes. However, the editions of Holmes (540) and Marrou (62) both read στήσις (clothes, vestments). It is uncertain why Holmes (541) translated the word as ‘custom.’ Could Holmes’ unwarranted translation have prompted Ehrman’s editorial change or was it by assimilation with Diogonet 5.4 (cf. n.34 below)?


29 Spiritual Homilies 5.4 (PG 34, 497C).


34 Cf. Quaesten, Patrology, 250.

35 Diogonet 6.4 (Ehrman, 142).

36 Diogonet 5.4 (Ehrman, 138-40).


38 Cf. ibid, 187.

39 Diogonet 5.3 (Ehrman, 138); cf. 7.1-2 (at 142-45).

40 Diogonet 4.6 (Ehrman, 138).

41 Cf. Spiritual Homilies 5.4 (PG 34, 497AB).

66 Diognetus 5.11 and 16 (Ehrman, 140).
69 Diognetus 6.9 (Ehrman, 142).
73 Diognetus 6.2 (Ehrman, 140-42).
74 Diognetus 6.3 (Ehrman, 142).
75 Cf. Foster, ‘The Epistle to Diognetus,’ 165; Tanner, ‘The Epistle to Diognetus,’ 502-3 (against Marrou’s conclusion that this is a classical Stoic stance). Marrou (op. cit., 146-66) explores a series of more positive Christian antecedents of this theme, in the New Testament, the apologetic tradition and in the early Alexandrines.

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77 Diognetus 6.5 (Ehrman, 142).
78 Diognetus 6.9 (Ehrman, 142). See the thematic parallel with Romans 8:36, cf. Psalm 44:22 (LXX).
81 Ică, ‘Biserică, societate și gândire,’ 21 (my translation).
82 Cf. Marrou, ‘Commentaire,’ 138-41, 144-45.
83 Ibid, 175 (my translation).
84 *Diogennus* 6.10 (Ehrman, 142-43).
88 *Diogennus* 6.6 (Ehrman, 142).
89 *Diogennus* 6.10 (Ehrman, 142).
90 Ică, ‘Biserică, societate și gândire,’ 19 (my translation); see also 21.
93 Cf. van de Beek, ‘Every Foreign Land,’ 179-82, 187-91.

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94 Marrou, ‘Commentaire,’ 174.