

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

Doru Costache

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 Diognesian 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 latter's 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*

.....30.....

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 Diognesian 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

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 Diognesian 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 Beek⁴ 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 being⁵ or the evasionist solution proposed by van de Beek, who pictured a Christian community dwelling outside of time and space.⁶ 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,⁷ 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

.....31.....

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'⁸ 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*;⁹ in all likelihood the *Message* being a common source for Aristides and *Diognetus*.¹⁰ 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 the Gentiles.¹¹ 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,¹² is in fact an address or exhortation, and not an epistle. It belongs to the apologetic genre,¹³ and was supposedly drafted in the second half of the second century or early third century.¹⁴ 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.'¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ 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)¹⁷ address the crucial question of how to communicate the Christian message to outsiders. The manuscript was discovered in 1436 and published in 1592.¹⁸

Diognetus 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.¹⁹ Its goal was to persuade the recipient, a certain Diognetus, 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),²⁰ 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,²¹ and inspirational at times – is not of interest here. Nevertheless, two chapters in *Diognetus* are of particular relevance to our topic, namely the fifth and the sixth.²² 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).'²³ Depicted with both prudence and boldness, the Christian lifestyle or polity²⁴ constitutes the central theme of the chapters

under consideration here. The Disciple seemingly attempted to forestall the pagan allegations that Christians were anti-social,²⁵ by eventually emphasising the superiority of the latter's 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,

Christians²⁶ do not differ (διακεκριμένοι) from the rest of people by place, or language, or their habits.²⁷ 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).²⁸

Apart from the terminological variances, the fifth Macarian homily reiterates the idea of the above passage: 'the difference (ἀλλοίωσις) of Christians does not

consist in outward (ἐξωτερῶς) forms and signs.²⁹ The sentence brings to further clarity the opening assertion of the same homily, which echoes *Diognetus* even more: ‘The world of Christians is different (ἕτερος), and their behaviour (διαγωγή), mindset (νοῦς), manner of speech (λόγος), and action (πράξις), happen to be different [to those of worldly people].’³⁰ The only divergences from *Diognetus* occur in the theme of a different ‘world of Christians’ (ὁ τῶν Χριστιανῶν κόσμος ἕτερός 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,³¹ indeed aspects that cannot be reduced to ‘outward forms and signs.’ Interestingly, the problematic discussed by *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.³² This approach evokes the stances against religious formalism in *Diognetus* 4.1.³³

.....34.....

Returning to *Diognetus*, we read that as ‘followers of the customs’ pertaining to the countries of their dwelling,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,³⁵ the phrase ‘followers of the customs’ and the accompanying examples (cf. *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,³⁶ Christians are therefore not *une secte excentrique*, as Marrou noted.³⁷ Similarly, Lieu observed correctly: ‘Social separation is not a Christian characteristic.’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 Alexandrian³⁹ 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’⁴⁰ in an ostentatious fashion. Christian godliness remains unseen (ἀόρατος δὲ αὐτῶν ἡ θεοσέβεια μένει),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:

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 (θαυμαστήν καὶ ὁμολογουμένως παράδοξον) condition of their way of life (τὴν κατάστασιν τῆς ἑαυτῶν πολιτείας).⁴²

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*,

.....35.....

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.’⁴³ 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,⁴⁴ does not stand as such. Although I agree partially with this assertion, I believe that Lieu’s appraisal of *Diognetus* 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.’⁴⁵ A similar antithesis referred to Christian godliness and the ‘idle pursuit and arrogance of the Jews.’⁴⁶ 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 ἁγίου), ‘dwell in a heavenly mindset’ (ἐν τῷ οὐρανίῳ φρονήματι τυγχάνειν).⁴⁷ Regarding the source of this wisdom, the Disciple would have pointed to the Logos of God, like in *Diognetus* 7.1-2,⁴⁸ 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 ἰδίας αὐτῶν θεοσεβείας μυστήριον),⁴⁹ 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

.....36.....

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,⁵⁰ 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 atypical 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, Icañ observed with reference to *Diognetus*:

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 (πᾶσα ξένη πατρίς ἐστὶν αὐτῶν) and for them any homeland is foreign (πᾶσα 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 οὐρανῷ πολιτεύονται).'⁵⁵ This statement should not be considered in terms of some evasionist propensities, as discussed above. Somehow

.....37.....

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 transcendance* ('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 σαρκὶ τυγχάνουσιν, ἀλλ' οὐ κατὰ σάρκα ζῶσιν),⁵⁷ Christians marry (γαμοῦσιν) and have children (τεκνογονοῦσιν) like all do yet they neither destroy their offspring⁵⁸ nor share their spouses.⁵⁹ 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, Lieu⁶⁴ 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

.....38.....

claim absolute novelty; the early apologists often noticed the continuity between worthwhile aspects of humanity's pre-Christian experience and the Christian renovation of the values.⁶⁵ 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 (ἀγαπᾶσι πάντας) and are persecuted by all,' 'they do good (ἀγαθοποιούντες) and are punished as evildoers.'⁶⁶ 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 (μιμητῆς ἐστὶ θεοῦ).⁶⁷ 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,⁶⁸ 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 path⁶⁹ – 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.⁷⁰ 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.

.....39.....

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.⁷¹ For the Disciple, 'in the world, Christians are what the soul is in the body' (ὅπερ ἐστὶν ἐν σώματι ψυχὴ, τοῦτ' εἰσὶν ἐν κόσμῳ Χριστιανοί).⁷² 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 – ἔσπαρται, 'is scattered into' – the body.⁷³ 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 indistinctly merge with the world in which they live: ‘Christians inhabit the world but are not of the world.’⁷⁴ 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,⁷⁵ to assert that Christians are in the world as if arrested (κατέχονται) in a ward (ὡς ἐν φρουρᾷ).⁷⁶ 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’⁷⁷ and ‘Christians are persecuted everyday.’⁷⁸ 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 (αὐτοὶ δὲ συνέχουσι τὸν κόσμον).⁷⁹ This statement brings to clarity an earlier assertion concerning Christians who, their poverty notwithstanding, can enrich many.⁸⁰ 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 Ică.

.....40.....

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.⁸¹

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.⁸² More precisely, Christians appear *comme l'équivalent d'une âme cosmique* (‘like the equivalent of a cosmic soul’).⁸³ 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,⁸⁴ *Diognetus* 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.⁸⁵ 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).⁸⁶ Could this be another patristic echo of *Diognetus*, 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, Ică 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

.....41.....

theme was rehearsed in a narrower sense, as the prayer of the monks, in a letter by St Serapion of Thmuis.⁸⁷

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.'⁸⁸ 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.⁸⁹ 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 Ică'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.'⁹⁰

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.⁹¹ Together with their new status, the presence of Christians and their activity were construed as quintessential to the consolidation of the State. Ică 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.⁹² The project remains therefore a sacred task – which cannot be completed without historical realism, like in the assertions of van de Beek.⁹³ 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

.....42.....

specificity, mainly regarding the complex interactions of the Church and its broader context. Marrou⁹⁴ 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 problematic⁹⁵ and without the awareness that Christianity is after all an interiorised commitment to Christ.

There is nothing ‘remarkably opaque,’ as Lieu insisted,⁹⁶ 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.

.....43.....

Acknowledgments

I express my gratitude to the two *Phronema* reviewers for their insightful recommendations, to Fr Bogdan Bucur and Fr Cristian Cădă for kindly facilitating the access to sources that were beyond my reach, and to Mario Baghos and Dimitri Kepreotes for their pertinent stylistic suggestions.

□ □ □

NOTES:

Revd Doru Costache received his Doctor of Theology degree from the University of Bucharest, in 2000. He is a Presbyter under the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia and a Senior Lecturer in Patristics at St Andrew’s Greek Orthodox Theological College, Sydney. His research interests are in traditional/patristic theology, transdisciplinarity and the dialogue of science and theology. Currently, he undertakes an interpretation of Genesis 1 within tradition and in the light of contemporary challenges.

¹ Ioan I. Ică Jr., ‘Biserică, societate și gândire în Răsărit, în Occident și în Europa de azi,’ in *Gândirea Socială a Bisericii: Fundamente, Documente, Analize, Perspective*, ed. Ioan I. Ică Jr. and Germano Marani (Sibiu: Deisis, 2002): 17-54, esp. 19.

² Judith M. Lieu, ‘The Forging of Christian Identity and the *Letter to Diognetus*,’ in *Neither Jew nor Greek? Constructing Early Christianity* (London: T&T Clark, 2002): 171-89.

³ Cf. n.1 above.

⁴ Abraham van de Beek, 'Every Foreign Land Is Their Native Country, and Every Land of Birth Is a Land of Strangers: *Ad Diognetum* 5,' *Journal of Reformed Theology* 1 (2007): 178-94.

⁵ Cf. *ibid*, 179-81, 191-94.

⁶ Cf. *ibid*, 187-91.

⁷ Cf. Henri-Irénée Marrou, 'Commentaire,' in *À Diognète*, intro., éd. critique, trad. et comment. de Henri-Irénée Marrou, Sources Chrétiennes 33 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1951), 87-268, esp. 174-76.

⁸ Cf. *Diognetus* 1. When not otherwise indicated, the edition used herein is *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 2, ed. and trans. Bart D. Ehrman, Loeb Classical Library 25 (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2003), 131-59, here 130-31.

⁹ Cf. Richard Norris, 'The Apologists,' in *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frances Young, Lewis Ayres and Andrew Louth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 36-44, esp. 37-38. See also

.....44.....

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.

¹⁰ Cf. Marrou, 'Commentaire,' 121, 131-32.

¹¹ *Diognetus* 5.17 (Ehrman, 140). On related aspects, see Ferdinand Christian Baur, *The Church History of the First Three Centuries*, vol. 2, trans. Allan Menzies (London and Edinburgh: Williams and Norgate, 1879), 132-35; Georges Florovsky, 'Antinomies of Christian History: Empire and Desert,' in *Collected Works* vol. 2: *Christianity and Culture* (Belmont, Mass.: Nordland Publishing Company, 1974): 67-100, esp. 71-72; W. H. C. Frend, 'Martyrdom and Political Oppression,' in *The Early Christian World*, vol. 1, ed. Philip F. Esler (London and New York: Routledge, 2000): 815-38; Mark Humphries, *Early Christianity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 196-97; Jeffrey S. Siker, 'Christianity in the Second and Third Centuries,' in *The Early Christian World*, vol. 2, ed. Philip F. Esler: 231-57.

¹² See e.g. Pär Sandin, 'Diognetiana,' *Vigiliae Christianae*, 61 (2007): 253-57; R. G. Tanner, 'The Epistle to Diognetus and Contemporary Greek Thought,' *Studia Patristica*, 15:1 (1984): 495-508, esp. 505. Cf. my n.27 below.

¹³ On the apologists, see Baur, *The Church History of the First Three Centuries*, 137-38; Nicole Zeegers-Vander Vorst, 'Apologists,' in Jean-Yves Lacoste (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Christian Theology*, vol. 1: *A-F* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005): 73-75; Eric Osborn, 'The Apologists,' in *The Early Christian World*, ed. Philip F. Esler, vol. 1: 525-51.

¹⁴ For more details, see Paul Foster, 'The Epistle to Diognetus,' *The Expository Times* 118:4 (2007): 162-68; Marrou, 'Commentaire,' 241-68; Quasten, *Patrology*, 248-52; Norris, 'The Apologists,' 43-44; Zeegers-Vander Vorst, 'Apologists,' 73; Tanner, 'The Epistle to Diognetus,' 495-96. See also Bart D. Ehrman, 'Introduction' to *Epistle to Diognetus*, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 2 (cited above n.8), 122-29; *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, ed. and revised by Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1999), 528-31; David Warner, 'Apostolic Fathers,' in *The Encyclopedia of Christian Literature*, vol. 1: *Genres and Types / Biographies A-G*, ed. George Thomas Kurian and James D. Smith III (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2010): 12-16, esp. 15-16.

.....45.....

¹⁵ Ehrman, 'Introduction,' 127. Similarly, Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 529; Foster, 'The Epistle to Diognetus,' 162, 167.

¹⁶ Cf. *Spiritual Homilies* 5.1-4 (PG 34, 493D-497D).

¹⁷ Cf. Ehrman, 'Introduction,' 123-24. Cf. Marrou, 'Commentaire,' 98-240; Osborn, 'The Apologists,' 526; Quasten, *Patrology*, 249-51; Foster, 'The Epistle to Diognetus,' 163-66.

¹⁸ 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. Shanahan (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.

¹⁹ Marrou, ‘Commentaire,’ 98-118; Sandin, ‘Diognetiana,’ 255; Tanner, ‘The Epistle to Diognetus,’ 500-1.

²⁰ *Diognetus* 1 (Ehrman, 130-1). See Ehrman, ‘Introduction,’ 126; Tanner, ‘The Epistle to Diognetus,’ 498-99.

²¹ Cf. Tanner, ‘The Epistle to Diognetus,’ 499-500. His entire article discusses the various philosophical echoes within the tract.

²² 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.

²³ *Diognetus* 6.3 (Ehrman, 142).

²⁴ *Diognetus* 5.4 (Ehrman, 140). Tanner, ‘The Epistle to Diognetus,’ 502, rejects the usual translation, ‘citizenship.’

²⁵ Cf. Lieu, ‘The Forging of Christian Identity,’ 183; Siker, ‘Christianity in the Second and Third Centuries,’ 242-49.

²⁶ For the use of the term ‘Christian’ in *Diognetus*, briefly, see David G. Horrell, ‘The Label Χριστιανός: 1 Peter 4:16 and the Formation of Christian Identity,’ *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 126:2 (2007): 361-81, esp. 361, n.2.

.....46.....

²⁷ Here I followed Ehrman (140), which gives ἔθει (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 ἔσθει (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 *Diognetus* 5.4 (cf. n.34 below)?

²⁸ *Diognetus* 5.1-2 (Ehrman, 138-39).

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

³⁰ *Ibid*, 5.1 (PG 34, 493D).

³¹ *Ibid*, 5.4 (PG 34, 497BC).

³² See *ibid*, 5.4 (PG 34, 497C).

³³ Ehrman, 136.

³⁴ *Diognetus* 5.4 (Ehrman, 138).

³⁵ Cf. van de Beek, ‘Every Foreign Land,’ 185-86.

³⁶ Cf. Florovsky, ‘Antinomies of Christian History,’ 67; Frances Young, ‘Christian Teaching,’ in *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature*, ed. Young, Ayres and Louth, (cited above n.9): 91-104, esp. 95-96.

³⁷ Marrou, ‘Commentaire,’ 119; cf. 133-34. Similarly, Florovsky, ‘Antinomies of Christian History,’ 69.

³⁸ Lieu, ‘The Forging of Christian Identity,’ 183.

³⁹ See Clement, *Exhortation to the Greeks* 1: ‘See how mighty is the new song [i.e., the song of the Gospel]! It has made men out of stones and men out of beasts.’ Cf. Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Greeks – The Rich Man’s Salvation – To The Newly Baptized*, with an English trans. by G. W. Butterworth, Loeb Classical Library 92 (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2003), 10-11.

⁴⁰ Cf. Quasten, *Patrology*, 250.

⁴¹ *Diognetus* 6.4 (Ehrman, 142).

⁴² *Diognetus* 5.4 (Ehrman, 138-40).

⁴³ Cf. Lieu, ‘The Forging of Christian Identity,’ 179.

.....47.....

⁴⁴ Cf. *ibid*, 187.

⁴⁵ *Diognetus* 5.3 (Ehrman, 138); cf. 7.1-2 (at 142-45).

⁴⁶ *Diognetus* 4.6 (Ehrman, 138).

⁴⁷ Cf. *Spiritual Homilies* 5.4 (PG 34, 497AB).

⁴⁸ Ehrman, 142, 144.

⁴⁹ *Diognetus* 4.6 (Ehrman, 138).

⁵⁰ Cf. *ibid.*

⁵¹ Ică, 'Biserică, societate și gândire,' 22 (my translation).

⁵² *Diognetus* 5.5 (Ehrman, 140).

⁵³ Cf. Florovsky, 'Antinomies of Christian History,' 68; Lieu, 'The Forging of Christian Identity,' 179-80. On the Pauline affinities of the *Letter*, see Marrou, 'Commentaire,' 127-28. In his brief list of scriptural elements in *Diognetus*, Trigg made no mention of the Pauline sources. Cf. Joseph Trigg, 'The Apostolic Fathers and Apologists,' in *A History of Biblical Interpretation*, vol. 1: *The Ancient Period*, ed. Alan J. Hauser and Duane F. Watson (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003): 304-33, esp. 315.

⁵⁴ Cf. Tanner, 'The Epistle to Diognetus,' 502.

⁵⁵ *Diognetus* 5.9 (Ehrman, 140). The phrase echoes Philippians 3:20, likewise cited by the *Spiritual Homilies* 5.3 (PG 34, 497A), which makes even more obvious the affiliation of these writings.

⁵⁶ Marrou, 'Commentaire,' 134 (my translation). See also Ică, 'Biserică, societate și gândire,' 21.

⁵⁷ *Diognetus* 5.8 (Ehrman, 140).

⁵⁸ See *Diognetus* 5.6 (Ehrman, 140).

⁵⁹ Cf. *Diognetus* 5.7 (Ehrman, 140).

⁶⁰ *Diognetus* 5.11-12, 14-17 (Ehrman, 140).

⁶¹ Cf. van de Beek, 'Every Foreign Land,' 192-93.

⁶² *Diognetus* 5.11 (Ehrman, 140); 10.6 (Ehrman, 152-53). Analysing chapter 10, Tanner, 'The Epistle to Diognetus,' 504, ignored compassion as the way

.....48.....

of achieving divine resemblance. On *Diognetus* 10.6, see Foster, 'The Epistle to Diognetus,' 166; Ică, 'Biserică, societate și gândire,' 21; Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 101. For further comments on divine philanthropy and its human imitation, see Juan Ignacio Ruiz Aldas, 'La recepción del concepto de *philanthropía* en la literatura cristiana de los dos primeros siglos,' *Scripta Theologica* 42:2 (2010): 277-308. The author mentions the passages in *Diognetus* 8.7 and 9.2 but only regarding God's love for humankind (278, 295-96), ignoring the human emulation of this divine attribute espoused in chapter 10. That said, Ruiz Aldas' conclusions (303-5) on the equation of Christian love and divine philanthropy in the first two centuries remain valid.

⁶³ *Diognetus* 5.10 (Ehrman, 140). Cf. Bardenhewer, *Patrology*, 68; Marrou, 'Commentaire,' 129-30.

Tanner, 'The Epistle to Diognetus,' 502-3, noticed here more Stoic echoes.

⁶⁴ Cf. Lieu, 'The Forging of Christian Identity,' 180-82.

⁶⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 174; Norris, 'The Apologists,' 36-37; Siker, 'Christianity in the Second and Third Centuries,' 233; Zeegers-Vander Vorst, 'Apologists,' 73-74.

⁶⁶ *Diognetus* 5.11 and 16 (Ehrman, 140).

⁶⁷ *Diognetus* 10.6 (Ehrman, 152). Cf. Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification*, 101.

⁶⁸ Cf. Lieu, 'The Forging of Christian Identity,' 171, 189.

⁶⁹ *Diognetus* 6.9 (Ehrman, 142).

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* Cf. Marrou, 'Commentaire,' 136-37.

⁷¹ Cf. Marrou, 'Commentaire,' 172-73.

⁷² *Diognetus* 6.1 (Ehrman, 140). Cf. Baur, *The Church History of the First Three Centuries*, vol. 2, 129-31.

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.

⁷⁶ *Diognetus* 6.7 (Ehrman, 142). Cf. Ică, 'Biserică, societate și gândire,' 21-22.

.....49.....

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).

-
- ⁷⁹ *Diognetus* 6.7 (Ehrman, 142). Cf. Osborn, 'The Apologists,' 526.
⁸⁰ *Diognetus* 5.13 (Ehrman, 140), alluding to 2 Corinthians 6:10. Cf. Marrou, 'Commentaire,' 137.
⁸¹ Ică, 'Biserică, societate și gândire,' 21 (my translation).
⁸² Cf. Marrou, 'Commentaire,' 138-41, 144-45.
⁸³ Ibid, 175 (my translation).
⁸⁴ *Diognetus* 6.10 (Ehrman, 142-43).
⁸⁵ Cf. John D. Barrow and Frank J. Tipler, *The Anthropic Cosmological Principle* (Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press and Oxford University Press, 1986), 22.

- ⁸⁶ Cf. *Ladder of the Divine Ascent* 28 (PG 88, 1129A).
⁸⁷ Cf. Ică, 'Biserică, societate și gândire,' 21, 25.
⁸⁸ *Diognetus* 6.6 (Ehrman, 142).
⁸⁹ *Diognetus* 6.10 (Ehrman, 142).
⁹⁰ Ică, 'Biserică, societate și gândire,' 19 (my translation); see also 21.
⁹¹ See G. R. Evans, 'The Early Church in the World,' in *The First Christian Theologians: An Introduction to Theology in the Early Church*, ed. G. R. Evans, (Carlton: Blackwell Publishers, 2004): 58-64; Florovsky, 'Antinomies of Christian History,' 72-75. For details from the Christian tradition after *Diognetus*, see Marrou, 'Commentaire,' 166-171.

- ⁹² Cf. Ică, 'Biserică, societate și gândire,' 24-28.
⁹³ Cf. van de Beek, 'Every Foreign Land,' 179-82, 187-91.

.....50.....

- ⁹⁴ Marrou, 'Commentaire,' 174.
⁹⁵ I sketched some relevant aspects elsewhere. See my 'The Inner Side of the Visible: Apostolic Criteria and Spirit in the Orthodox Tradition,' in Teodosie Petrescu (ed.), *Omagiu Profesorului Nicolae V. Dură la 60 de ani* (Constanța: Editura Arhiepiscopiei Tomisului, 2006): 386-392.
⁹⁶ Cf. Lieu, 'The Forging of Christian Identity,' 182-83.