

What common elements were there among the various heresies which Irenaeus sought to address? Evaluate the theological devices he used to refute them.

Introduction:

Irenaeus of Lyon was faced with the classic “obstacle that is an opportunity in disguise”. In his lifetime Christianity developed from being a minority ex-Jewish cult, to a truly worldwide, established religion. Yet there were enemies. Some were relatively simple to handle. Martyrdom became an honour. Some were small-scale enough not to warrant large-scale action. But some were complex and persistent. The issues facing Irenaeus were of just such a type. The teachers and preachers of heresies were a growing danger. They were finding fertile ground in the church and something had to be done to counter their offensive. Irenaeus was the man to launch the first detailed and informed written attack on their positions.

We shall look at the heresies he opposed, the common elements they shared and the effectiveness of his theological methods.

1. Heretics and their Heresies

What were the common elements in the various heresies addressed by Irenaeus? To answer this question we shall first identify the various heresies he dealt with, and secondly discover their common elements.

a) Heresies contemporaneous with Irenaeus.

There were many heretical groups and teachers of the day. Among them were a number of groups loosely described as ‘Gnostic’. As Chadwick said: ‘To Irenaeus of Lyons Gnosticism was a rag-bag of heathen speculations with bits taken from different philosophers to dress out a bogus anti-rational mythology.’¹ With the benefit of more recent scholarship and the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library in Egypt in 1945-46, there is a greater awareness of the variety of teachings from that time than ever before. Irenaeus did have access to documents: ‘I have also made a collection of their writings ...’², but ‘It is certain that the picture he offers of Gnostic teachings is far from complete’.³

The chief heresies and heretics he sought to address were all, as he saw them, a product of Simon Magus: ‘...I have simply been led to mention him, that thou mightest know that all those who in any way corrupt the truth, and injuriously affect the preaching of the church, are the disciples and successors of Simon Magus of Samaria.’⁴ Marcion, the Valentinians and Gnostics as a whole were his main targets.⁵

¹ Chadwick, *History*, 74.

² Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.31.2.

³ Minns, *Irenaeus*, 13.

⁴ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.27.4.

⁵ Others included: Saturninus, Ptolemy, the Ophites, Menander, Marcus the Magician, Marcellina, the Barbelognostics, the Cainites, the Ebionites and the Carpocratians.

b) Their Common Elements

These groups defy a uniform description. As Osborn said (and this could apply to all the heretical groups here being dealt with): 'The Gnostic is an indescribable in pursuit of the incompatible.'⁶ We do find, however, these broad areas of agreement laid out in Osborn:

- i. While there is an appeal to scripture enlarged by their own Gospels (3.11.7) and an appeal to oral traditions of their own (3.2.1), there is a denial of Old Testament Scripture;
- ii. The saving God is not the creator (1.22.1) and the prophets are not part of the divine economy (4.34.1);
- iii. The word of God did not become flesh (3.11.3). In the Eucharist they offer bread and wine to a god other than the creator, who must be outraged by gifts which are foreign to him (4.18.4)
- iv. The flesh cannot be saved into incorruption (5.2.2).⁷

We might add to these the Gnostic concepts of salvation by revelatory knowledge as opposed to saving faith, the absence of free will for the 'hylics' who are predetermined for damnation, and the claim that the Christ did not suffer but that another took his place (Simon of Cyrene, according to Basilides⁸).⁹

2. Evaluating the Theological Devices

To what extent did Irenaeus succeed in refuting the false doctrines of the heretics, given the theological devices he used? First a defining of his approach and then an evaluation of it will follow.

a. Listing the Theological Devices

A principle to debate at the outset is the contention that Irenaeus was not setting out what he regarded as new arguments. Minns comments: 'Irenaeus would have been deeply offended had it been suggested to him that he was an original thinker.'¹⁰ Much depends on how 'originality' is defined. It can surely be argued that the 'original thinker' in Irenaeus was active in collating the documents, engaging in discussion with his opponents¹¹ and writing a long and highly detailed document, quite the like of which had ne'er before seen the light of day. Original he was, but the arguments he used depended for

⁶ Osborn, *Irenaeus*, 266.

⁷ Osborn, *Irenaeus*, 152.

⁸ Filoramo, *Gnosticism*, 125-126.

⁹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.24.4.

¹⁰ Minns, *Irenaeus*, 132.

¹¹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1. Pref. 2

their effectiveness on their well-established precedent and authority. Here are listed his main methods:

- i. Appeal to Scripture
- ii. Use of rational argument (including metaphor, humour and sarcasm)
- iii. Argument from lifestyle (including the outworking of the lives of the heretics, their hypocrisy and lack of Biblical morality).
- iv. Appeal to the 'Living Voice' of the church. The 'Rule of Faith'.
- v. Apostolic authority & succession

b. Considering how well these devices answered the heretical doctrines

Before addressing the specific methods above, it is worth contemplating the fact that in evaluating them we must take into account contextual issues. In the culture of his day, can we presume that his effectiveness might have been evaluated by different criteria to that used today? What could appear an unconvincing argument to the modern mind, may well have been given great credence in the time of Irenaeus. Arguments clear to the people of his time are not necessarily clear to people in our day. Argumentative devices deemed legitimate in his era may not be regarded as such in subsequent ages including our own. It is difficult to evaluate the significance of these issues, but perhaps the best that can be said is that our analysis should be offered in all humility.

There is also the issue of our not having the manuscripts in Greek – the language in which he wrote 'Against Heresies'. Only those in Latin and a few Aramaic manuscripts survive. The translating from Greek to Latin to English means that some of the subtleties and meanings must inevitably have been lost. Our most recent English translation having been done in Victorian times also hampers our understanding of his arguments.

Not having the original manuscripts of his opponents is another problem. We are relying on Irenaeus' integrity in faithfully representing the arguments he is attempting to refute. There has been some dispute about this, but modern scholarship seems to tip to the side of believing he reported accurately: 'Irenaeus is a precious source: "Nag Hammadi has done much to confirm the conclusions already drawn ... in relation to the substantial reliability of Irenaeus"'¹².

¹² Filoramo, *Gnosticism*, 4.

i. Appeal to Scripture

Not all commentators have been convinced by Irenaeus' use of scripture. Lawson, for example, says: 'His constant quotation of Biblical texts is arbitrary and forced, but it was much more than an outward form. It was a true token of his inward spirit.'¹³ It appears that Lawson feels the use of the scriptures was not effective, but that Irenaeus' sincerity was intact. A little reflection on a different but not unrelated issue may give us pause for thought on this subject.

To most modern minds, as we read our Masoretically translated Old Testament texts, the ease with which many New Testament writers find Messianic meanings from their Septuagintal translation of Old Testament passages is rather unnerving. Perhaps something of a parallel nature is happening with Irenaeus. We cannot enforce our modern assumptions upon the culture of a time so far removed from our own. The argument Irenaeus uses in 4.2.3 to demonstrate the connection between Jesus, Moses and Abraham is well thought out. If the heretics accept Jesus, they must also accept Moses and Abraham. If they accept Moses and Abraham, they will have to accept their God as being Jesus' God and the promises as being relevant to the Christological plan. Although some of Irenaeus' use of scripture is weak in our understanding of best practice, yet enough has good exegetical grounding to indicate that he was successful in proving his point.

ii. Use of rational argument (including metaphor, humour and sarcasm)

Irenaeus comes across as a man passionate about his beliefs. Osborn says: 'The passion for truth, which marked the Platonic tradition, governs Irenaeus in his approach to heresy, ... He is concerned to argue, expose, illuminate and expand.'¹⁴ He will use every trick in the book to make his point. He is sarcastic as when he describes Valentinus as a 'vacuum'¹⁵. He uses humour to make a point about creation using various vegetables and fruits.¹⁶ 'Against them Irenaeus used the weapons of parody and pastiche, not for personal ridicule but to show that their opinions were inappropriate.'¹⁷ He also uses metaphor and conjures up clear images that illuminate his point such as when he comes towards the conclusion of the first book and likens the false teachings he has been countering to a beast that he has beaten out into the open.¹⁸ Such pictures stick in the mind long after words have been forgotten.

iii. Argument from lifestyle

Casting aspersions on another group in public was a dangerous game to play. This did not seem to worry Irenaeus: 'To achieve their goal, they were permitted to use the most diverse means provided that they did not violate the

¹³ Lawson, *Irenaeus*, 292

¹⁴ Osborn, *Irenaeus*, 18.

¹⁵ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 2.4.1

¹⁶ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.11.4

¹⁷ Osborn, *Irenaeus*, 143.

¹⁸ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.31.4

accepted norms of professional ethics.¹⁹ The danger of accusing the heretics of licentious living and loose morals (especially the seducing of women) was that similar charges could be levied at those Irenaeus might call Christian.

Another perhaps more fruitful tack, was to draw attention to the avowed belief that the Gnostic was bound to experience all that life had to offer. Irenaeus observed an inconsistency in the way this teaching was practiced. He saw that the Gnostic was far more eager to pursue to pleasurable things that life had to offer than the things that required self-denial and suffering: 'When they further maintain that it is cumbent on them to have experience of every kind of work and conduct, they may [at once] pass over to the state of perfection, they are, by no chance, found striving to do those things which wait upon virtue, and are laborious, glorious, and skilful, whether they be acquired by self-denial, or are mastered through means of labour, exercise, and perseverance; as, for example, every kind of music, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, the whole study of medicine, and the knowledge of plants, the art of painting and sculpture, brass and marble work, ... country labour, the veterinary art, pastoral occupations, the various kinds of skilled labour, a maritime life, gymnastic exercises, hunting, military and kingly pursuits, and as many others as may exist, of which, with the utmost labour, they could not learn the tenth, or even the thousandth part, in the whole course of their lives. The fact indeed is, that they endeavour to learn none of these, but, turning aside to voluptuousness, and lust, and abominable actions, they stand self-condemned when they are tried by their own doctrine. These men, while they boast of Jesus as being their Master, do in fact emulate the philosophy of Epicurus and the indifference of the Cynics, [calling Jesus their Master,] who not only turned His disciples away from evil deeds, but even from [wicked] words and thoughts, as I have already shown.'²⁰

iv. Appeal to the 'Living Voice' of the church. The 'Rule of Faith'.

Irenaeus made much of the unity of teaching, belief and practice of the church universal: 'But as we follow for our teacher the one and only true God, and possess His words as *the rule of truth* (italics mine), we do all speak alike with regard to the same things, knowing but one God, the Creator of this universe, who sent the prophets, who led forth the people from the land of Egypt, who in these last times manifested His own Son, that He might put the unbelievers to confusion, and search out the fruit of righteousness.'²¹ In truth, there were few Gnostics who could agree with this statement, and it is quite possible that just as Marcion's heresies probably speeded the gathering of the New Testament canon, so the various Gnostic groups indirectly encouraged churchmen and women to formulate the faith. It would seem that creeds are one off-shoot of the controversies in which Irenaeus became embroiled.

¹⁹ Filoramo, *History*, 3

²⁰ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 2.32.2

²¹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.35.4

v. Apostolic authority & succession

Irenaeus made much of the fact that there was an 'unbroken' line of bishops who were identifiable by name from the days of Jesus to the present time.²² Although the Gnostics were wont to claim that they had secret knowledge, this was opposed by Irenaeus on the grounds that if this were so, why had Jesus' disciples and subsequent bishops not taught it. The argument is strong in that, although there were localised variants of doctrine, at no time had orthodox Christianity accepted the foundational teachings of Valentinus or any Gnostic teacher.

Conclusion

Irenaeus was a man not able to rely on any direct precedent for the situation he faced or the method with which to face it. His opponents were many and varied and he did not address every heresy or heretic. Some of his methods had a 'scatter-gun' approach and there were likely many more subtleties to the beliefs of the Gnostics and others than Irenaeus either knew or admitted to. Yet in employing his highly detailed approach, and clarifying the central doctrinal issues at stake, the Christian community was greatly strengthened.

It would seem right to be grateful for the writings of the man who successfully stemmed the tide of Gnosticism that threatened to overwhelm the still fledgling faith with its as yet incomplete canon. The theological methods he used to counter the heretics were appropriate to his day and mostly successful. His legacy and those of his contemporaries continues to aid adversaries of heretics today. As Wingren wrote: 'This, indeed, is Irenaeus' singular merit, that he co-ordinated the thought of his predecessors, and his strength as a systematic theologian lay exclusively in the fact that everything that belonged to the primitive period – the Scriptures, the Old and new testaments, and the different parts of the New Testamenst in their turn, and finally the various authorities of the early church – all this is collated and fused into a harmonious whole. In this work of unifying theological concepts Irenaeus has no equal.'²³

An appropriate epitaph might well be Chadwick's words: 'With Irenaeus the shape of Christian theology became stable and coherent.'²⁴

Malcolm Cox
2003

²² Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.3.1

²³ Wingren, *Incarnation*, xvi

²⁴ Chadwick, *History*, p80.