

## THE *LETTER TO DIOGNETUS* AND THE CHURCH'S MISSION TO MUSLIMS TODAY

*By Jacques Hebert*

*The Letter to Diognetus* (TLD) is one of the earliest apologetic writings.<sup>1</sup> Written by an anonymous author, he is popularly called Mathetes. The purpose of the letter was to demonstrate that Christians were not a danger to the city and Roman Empire. The anonymous writer is by no means the last to make such an argument. Almost exclusively, this letter has been used in scholarly discussions only for its lexical contributions to understanding the Greek New Testament.<sup>2</sup> Although Mathetes was writing in a different place and time, many of his insights are missiologically relevant and instructive for missionaries today. Consider the author's description of early Christian cultural integration and engagement:

For Christians cannot be distinguished from the rest of the human race by country or language or customs. They do not live in cities of their own; they do not use a peculiar form of speech; they do not follow an eccentric manner of life. This doctrine of theirs has not been discovered by the ingenuity or deep thought of inquisitive men, nor do they

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<sup>1</sup> Geisler and Nix place the date around 150 [Geisler, N. L., & Nix, W. E. *A General Introduction to the Bible*, (Chicago: Moody Press. 1996) 100.]. Roberts, Donaldson and Coxe date the letter at 130 [A. Roberts, J. Donaldson & A. C. Coxe (Eds.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume I: The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 23].

<sup>2</sup> *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, *The Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, and *The Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* are just a few examples of works which use TLD predominantly for lexical analysis. Schaff's *History of the Christian Church* and Paul Enns' *The Moody Handbook of Theology* are among the minority in their analysis of TLD on the basis of theology. Perhaps Ray Bakke in his *A Theology as Big as the City*, is among the first to address, albeit briefly, the missiological implications of TLD.

put forward a merely human teaching, as some people do. Yet, although they live in Greek and barbarian cities alike, as each man's lot has been cast, and follow the customs of the country in clothing and food and other matters of daily living, at the same time they give proof of the remarkable and admittedly extraordinary constitution of their own commonwealth. They live in their own countries, but only as aliens. They have a share in everything as citizens, and endure everything as foreigners. Every foreign land is their fatherland, and yet for them every fatherland is a foreign land. They marry, like everyone else, and they beget children, but they do not cast out their offspring. They share their board with each other, but not their marriage bed. It is true that they are "in the flesh," but they do not live "according to the flesh." They busy themselves on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven. They obey the established laws, but in their own lives they go far beyond what the laws require. They love all men, and by all men are persecuted. They are unknown, and still they are condemned; they are put to death, and yet they are brought to life. They are poor, and yet they make many rich; they are completely destitute, and yet they enjoy complete abundance. They are dishonored, and in their very dishonor are glorified; they are defamed, and are vindicated. They are reviled, and yet they bless; when they are affronted, they still pay due respect. When they do good, they are punished as evildoers; undergoing punishment, they rejoice because they are brought to life. They are treated by the Jews as foreigners and enemies, and are hunted down by the Greeks; and all the time those who hate them find it impossible to justify their enmity.<sup>3</sup>

The argument in this letter reflects the tone of those seeking to gain legitimacy as a minority within a larger group. Evangelistic approaches developed in majority settings focus on geographical separation, political dominance, and strict observance of the new *overculture's* particular religio-cultural taboos' contra-arguments developed in minority settings which reflect a more conciliatory and contextual tone. Majority setting apologists are more focused on demonstrating the theological differences and uniqueness of Chris-

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<sup>3</sup>This translation is taken from John Baillie, John T. McNeill, and Henry P. van Deusen, *The Library of Christian Classics*, Vol I. *Early Christian Fathers* ed. Cryil C. Richardson (Philadelphia: Westminster Press). This work can be accessed in its entirety at [www.ccel.org/ccel/richardson/fathers.x.i.ii.html](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/richardson/fathers.x.i.ii.html).

tian belief, values, and structures as a subculture—or *overculture*—and calling the non-Christian world to leave the lower world to become part of the separatist movement. The majority community seeks to demonstrate its faith based on adhering to separatist distinctives which often marginalizes minority communities.

In contrast to majority approaches, apologetic approaches from the times and places where Christians are in the minority take on a dramatically different tone from the approaches developed when Christians are in the majority. Evangelistic approaches from TLD focus on living exemplary lives in harmony with the larger culture, hospitality, materialistic detachment, and community regeneration. Arguments developed in minority settings demonstrate that Christianity seeks to redeem the community through identifying common goals, lives, and values. The emerging community was not seeking to build anything new, but to transform what was already there. Emerging communities seek to demonstrate their faith by internal transformation while still adhering to broader cultural norms when possible.

Applying TLD to the Islamic context may lead the reader to cry foul as the common perception is that the Islamic world is decidedly religious while the Greco-Roman world was somehow neutral. One might believe that the freedom with which Mathetes integrates Christian thought and practices is not applicable to practising Christian faith in Islamic contexts. This view, however, elevates Islamic theology to the extent to which it informs the broader Islamic culture while at the same time reduces the extent to which Greek philosophy and religion informed broader Greco-Roman culture. A word of caution is due, however, as the letter was written descriptively and this article uses the letter prescriptively. This article is the reasonable application of TLD to ministry in the Muslim world without taking into consideration social propriety or security issues. It also does not question the accuracy of Mathetes' claims concerning Christian life and practice in his context. There are four points of application to consider in TLD.

First, missionaries and native Christians should participate in the host culture. Christians in the west are notorious for setting up their own spaces and copycat structures, arts, and forms. Mathetes

argues to Diognetus that the early believers were externally indistinguishable from their fellow citizens. They spoke the same language and followed the same customs. They wore the same clothes and ate the same food. National believers and foreign missionaries alike are often prone to view the cultural externals of the Muslim world with suspicion and aversion. This has resulted in dual vocabularies regarding not only religious topics but even down to the way that people greet or offer comfort to one another after a sneeze. This has also resulted in the use of particular names for children and styles of dressing (not covering the hair, cross tattoos, gold jewelry, etc) so as to demonstrate their separation. If those in the broader culture can ascertain a person's religion by watching them walk down the street or hearing them introduce themselves then, according to TLD, we have erred on minutia rather than on essential Christianity. Christians should be free to use common vocabulary and similar clothing as a way of cultural adaptation and participation. The defining mark of believers is not in how they talk and dress, but in how they love.

Participation does not only have to do with personal externals, it also addresses where and how one chooses to live. Christians in Mathetes' community were marked by cultural normalcy; they were not "eccentric". The early emerging community in the letter chose to live among the "barbarian" cities. They did not separate themselves from those who were of questionable reputation and lifestyle. They were not interested in carving out their own space in the city that belonged to their sub-community. When Paul visited the overly-religious city of Athens, he noted that God does not live in buildings built by human hands. This proclamation was undoubtedly a relief to the Athens County Commissioner. Close location to the heathen was of vital importance since they stressed sharing their houses, lives, and wealth with those around them. It is hard to have a ministry built on hospitality and respectable living when one lives in a Christian ghetto. On the negative side, Christians have been prone to gather together as opposed to spreading beyond their geographic and cultural comfort zone. On the positive side, those who practice life together among the non-Christians as those in Mathetes' day did will have new opportunities to model the king-

dom lifestyle in a language, culture and social space that makes sense to non-Christians and makes it accessible to them.

Second, missionaries and native Christians should fully stake their lives in their host community. Mathetes' emerging community married and had children and planted their lives there among non-Christians. There was no claim to "fatherland" and no despair in living in the "foreign" world. One attitude that has continually plagued the church is the Platonic notion that God is not concerned with the here and now, but is simply concerned with the eternal business of saving souls. While there is always the weight of eternity, God loves the here-and-now nonetheless. He is seeking to restore all things to himself. Just like the exiles in Jeremiah's day were instructed to plant their lives, so lived the early Christians.

Third, missionaries and native Christians should not claim their rights in the culture. Although this may appear to be contradictory to point two it is not. While early believers were fully vested in their cities, they were at the same time aliens.

Content with their status as exiles and foreigners, they did not seek the proverbial place at the table. Strategically speaking, this mindset is freeing. Christians are always

They are...	In return they...
Put to death	Bring life
Poor and destitute	Make people rich and enjoy abundance
Dishonored	Bring glory from dishonor
Reviled	Pay due respect
Good	Punished for evil

free to do as they please in any context; however, they must be willing to pay the price for freely following the will of God. The emergent community worked as if they were the cornerstone of the community, lived lives in excess of the law's demands, loved all men, and shared their homes with anyone in need. The human nature's instinct of entitlement cringes at what they received in return: they were blamed as foreigners, their riches were passed on to others and they were persecuted as evildoers. They did all of this without developing a martyr's complex. Many of the clashes between local Christians and Muslims in the country where I served focused more on political and social rights and actions rather than

the offensive nature of the Gospel. Christians often were persecuted for converting their community centers into churches. While they were allowed to perform all of the functions of church in their community, they chose to convert them into churches (this requires the construction of a dome and the proper usage of crosses on the exterior of the building) in spite of not having official permission. More often than not, these events ended in bloodshed and embittered Muslims and Christians towards each other.

Fourth, missionaries and national Christians should take up their crosses and die. Mathetes argues that his community of Christians lived giving everything they had to the community and people where they lived. Not only did they refrain from developing a political strategy to try to prosper from all of the good will they had earned, they received just the opposite. While unjustly receiving the opposite for all of their sacrificial efforts, they maintained a Christ-like humility. They were not there to take over; they were not there to win. They were there to follow Christ through the way of the cross: death. While many believers are pushing for legal status and protection—and who can blame them—the work of Christ is not halted by the laws of man so long as the body of Christ has the mind of Christ.

Many people would argue that to make such social concessions is somehow compromising in any culture, much less in Islamic cultures. This sentiment is partly due to the fact that in western Christianity, particularly evangelicalism and fundamentalism, Christianity is defined primarily by what its followers do not do and what they are against.<sup>4</sup> The believers from TLD were primarily defined by what they chose to do and sacrifice. This is a Christian ethic in and of itself which follows the pattern of Christ. Jesus was continually getting into trouble with the religious leaders simply because he did not observe the same cultural minutia as they did. The beauty of Christ's work is not what he chose not to do, or with

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<sup>4</sup> A common adage is that "Christians don't smoke, drink or chew [tobacco] and they don't go out with folks that do." In religious-political circles, evangelicals are known primarily by what they are against: abortion, alcohol, gambling, gay marriage, etc.

whom he chose not to associate, but what he chose to sacrifice. In addition to what they did practice, and what they sacrificed, they did in fact stand up to the culture on two points. They refused to commit infanticide and although they shared their homes and belongings in every way, they did not commit adultery.

TLD provides a lot of license culturally that would make the gatekeepers of modern evangelicalism and fundamentalism nervous. They are nervous simply because at some point the church accepted Platonic dualism in practice over biblical holism; they rejected people, places and practices until they were willing to come out and be part of the majority community.<sup>5</sup> This has been somewhat common in the West. Churches in the southern states in America started the Color Guard who was responsible for denying entrance to African Americans. Similarly there were many churches who later denied entry to hippies because of their unkempt hair, slovenly appearances and deviant cultural practices. In the Middle East the issues are complicated by local laws which prohibit conversion and require

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<sup>5</sup> Platonic dualism was at the root of many early church heresies relating to the person of Jesus. They saw a problem with Jesus being both fully God and fully man if he had to take on evil matter. To fix this dilemma they argued that he either was not fully God or was not fully man. While these theological battles over evil matter and its implications on the hypostatic union are mostly a thing of the past, modern evangelicalism and fundamentalism have revived Platonic dualism as it relates to ethics. These movements drew on their puritanical roots and lived as if the material world was spiritually damaging. Vignettes of this can be seen in John Bunyan's description of the city of Vanity Fair in *Pilgrim's Progress*. Carl F. H. Henry opposes these views in his work *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* where he questions the legitimacy of Christians who will argue over social practices such as rook and cards but completely omit true social atrocities from their theologizing. In secular thought, Freudian psychology asserted that sin and guilt were a result of culture and upbringing. Contra Platonic dualism and Freudian explanations for sin, biblical holism asserts that the whole world was created good and though it is now fallen is not completely corrupted (eg. intrinsically evil). Thus, sin is not a result of external—material—corruption but of a fallen human nature. Francis Schaeffer is a champion of this view throughout his works in general, but most specifically in *True Spirituality*, *The Mark of the Christian*, and *The New Super Spirituality*. In this view, Christians should boldly speak to and live in all parts of culture. Christians should invade arts, politics, education and all other sectors to bring them under the lordship of Christ rather than drawing a line in the sand dividing the sacred from the secular.

religious identification on drivers' licenses. These laws often support social attitudes which require Christian converts from Islam to change their name and never receive full standing in the church. If the modern church goes back to an older approach to Christian living, it forces Christians out of their Christian comfort zones and into the world in sacrificial and dangerous ways. All of this is how TLD defines being "in the flesh" and not "according to the flesh"

Most western countries are experiencing cultural transformations wherein long-vested Christian establishments are finding themselves on the fringes of influence, power, and respectability. Many Christians in the Muslim world, who are already in a minority status, desire Western-style freedoms, particularly after the Arab Spring. Political power will forever be the seduction of the Church. Modern Christians must always remember that they are not the first to tread these grounds. There is much to be gained by refusing to fight for control and influence through human means. Christians should make their faith proactive and positive rather than simply reactive and negative. By setting aside the struggle for majority status and recognition Christians are able to focus on the calling to be incarnational. Mathetes paints a truly beautiful portrait of what a Christian minority looks like when they incarnate into the majority culture.