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Pagan and Christian religious identity in Late Antiquity

Discussing the meaning of Christian identity, I would like to refer to Late Antiquity - the times when for the first time Christianity made an attempt to define itself as a religion and a way to salvation. First and foremost, a general remark on the issue involves the way Christian identity was perceived. One who studies this problem is often tempted to perceive Christian identity as a fact which happened at a certain moment of history, though when we look at the problem from the historical perspective it turns out that it was and always will be a process. This means that there is no moment in time about which we can say that, in this particular period, Christians gained their identity and since then they simply have had it. Christian identity was, and still is, a reality which is under constant development and in studying it we can only try to define the most important stages of this process. In each period, we can identify crucial elements to understand this process - the conditions that shaped Christian self-awareness. When we treat the object of the study in a processual way we must always be aware of the fact that in the process a given moment in time always connects with the past and the future. Therefore, the presented topic must be analyzed with the influence of the past and its future development in mind.

In Early Christianity, the most important conditions influencing Christian self-definition were those which opposed and confronted it. It is generally admitted by the scholars that Christian identity was shaped at first in confrontation with Judaism and then in opposition to the pagan religion of the Roman Empire. The extend studies of Judith Lieu on the earliest period showed very well that Christians gained their original self-definition in the complex society of the Roman Empire, where Jews and pagans also struggled to define themselves. But with some degree of generalization, this complex process can be divided into two phases. In the first and the beginning of the second century, Christians separated themselves from Judaism. Later on, in the times of the persecutions, the community of the Church was strengthened as being in opposition to pagan beliefs. To see the whole picture and the entire process of development of Christian identity, I would like to add a third element. From the fourth century the process continued in confrontation with heresies, and this was the time when Christians realized more profoundly who they were, by defining precisely their beliefs.

For the purposes of this paper I shall briefly discuss the first stage — the opposition to Judaism. I would like to show some deeper insights on the second stage — the confrontation of early Christianity with the pagan religion which had its peak at the times of the great persecution. Those were the times when the early Church gained two very important aspects of its identity. First was the awareness of its own hierarchical structure, and the second and more crucial - the rise of a martyr as the model of the Saint and true Christian. I shall argue that the main role of the persecution was not its impact on pagan society, but rather its importance for the early Church itself.

Those remarks are in my mind so important, as they help to understand some processes which take place in the contemporary Church. It should offer an occasion to see similarities between ancient and contemporary processes in the Church and to check whether the ancient experience allows us to understand better present problems, and, most of all, whether we can see similar positive consequences of the present events for shaping Christian identity.