Induction and Allegory: Clement of Alexandria's Catechetical Method

This essay examines the pedagogical contribution of Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 150 – 215) and implications for contemporary catechesis.

Inductive Learning and Catechesis

Allegorical exegesis, a unique aspect of Clement's method, presents a useful model for contemporary catechists, when considering the question of how sacred mystery can be taught. Those at the outset of their Christian journey experience an accurate consciousness of their need for salvation, and are motivated to undergo instruction by the fear of failing to work out, so as to perfect, their faith. Yet there comes a point where fear of judgment is eclipsed by the joy of heavenly reward. Clement's method reflects the plurality of approaches employed by the divine pedagogue, including persuasive words, threats, and punishments.

Clement demonstrates intimate knowledge of inductive learning that allude to the "Mysteries of Eleusis." The Athenian youths processed to Eleusis and brought back "sacred objects," cloaked in secrecy, to the temple of Demeter. Candidates were initiated by mystagogue guides through various acts and formulas, including fasting and then drinking a hallucinogenic potion. The next day candidates underwent ritual cleansing in the sea, before offering a pig to the goddesses. The next four days were occupied with the Mysteries proper, conducted in the Hall of Initiation. Mysteries refer to rites kept hidden from all except the formally initiated, derived from múein (literally, to purse the lips). In the Phrygian mystery, the worshipper underwent a mystical marriage with the god, who was represented by a serpent. Analogous rites are found the world over and reflect a common recognition of the inductive nature of the highest forms of knowledge.

Such similarity raises the question of whether Clement "Christianized" the Greek Mysteries. Yet Clement attacked them when they were in full vigor and threatened to eclipse. While Clement considered the legends that provided the rationale for the rites to be both absurd and repulsive, he acknowledged that they demanded a serious refutation, not least because they were esteemed by the likes of Sophocles and Cicero. St. Paul reminded the Ephesians, who would have been acquainted with the mysteries, of the need for spiritual maturity or perfectedness; the original Greek word is teleios, which really means "full-grown," i.e. developed into a consummating completion by fulfilling the necessary process (spiritual journey).

In the same way that the various lenses in an old pirate telescope literally unfold until magnification reaches full strength (capacity effectiveness), so the Greek mysteries were

secrets, for which initiation was necessary. Clement situates the Christian scheme of salvation within the language of mystery. Prior to Clement, the Church had a bitter hostility towards the pagan Mysteries; however, after Clement, the word "mysteries" was used to describe the Christian sacraments, and above all the Paschal mystery within the Eucharist.

Concerning metaphors and parables as symbols, Clement was the first to outline a theory of Christian symbolism as well as the first rational justification of symbolism. His training manual "Paedagogus" foremost features biblical metaphors, consolidated and clarified against unfolding divine revelation. The Christian, for whom the whole noetic reality appears as a mystery, is called to penetrate the meaning of the metaphorical reality so as to overcome the world.

Allegorical Exegesis and Catechesis

Clement's method is predicated on divine incomprehensibility insofar as the immaterial God cannot be contained within sensible reality. Allegorical exegesis is thus required to approximate the transcendent realities signified in Scripture. Clement references Scripture, which he treats as an inspired and infallible storehouse of truth, on over five thousand occasions. Yet rather than treating these references as self-evident proof texts, Clement illuminates them with accumulated wisdom from Hellenistic philosophy.1 He quotes with verbal adaptations, often from memory, and sometimes he blends texts together,2 in the way synthesis naturally occurs once a meal derived of different food groups has been digested. His works are not commentaries, but rather discussions that always provoke further Socratic questions. The text is always open, always alive, ready to be discussed by the catechist with his students.

The development of language has been compared to the way an ancient citadel evolves over time to become a modern metropolis. The city is still fundamentally the same place, and certain features — medieval gates and churches — are still visible, but much has been added that has both enhanced and denigrated the past. Metaphors come to life at the intersection of the reader and the text; in the same way, the parable grows with the hearer. Clement's biblical exegesis demonstrates the "functionality of moral principles in real situations of life" as prescriptive instructions. For example, Clement reduces the scope from cosmic universals to practical guidance concerning eating and sleeping. Such dexterity with Scripture can be attributed to Clement's familiarity with diatribe. Yet Clement is not preoccupied with rhetoric, the pinnacle of ancient learning, but rather caveats the active construction of truth with the need to interpret scripture within tradition.

Clement justifies his allegorical exegesis, integral to his catechesis, insofar as the divine origin of scripture itself testifies to a meaning that transcends the literal because no human author witnessed the creation of the world. Moreover, "all who have spoken of divine things, barbarians as well as Greeks, have hidden the first principles and conveyed the truth through symbols, allegories and metaphors."3 Clement's exegetical method is therefore heavily invested in the apophatic theology he later addresses. Procreative and filial metaphors that

echo Pauline theology are employed in Clement's Paedagogus and Stromata. The divine filiation metaphor arises from the Fourth Gospel, taken by Clement to communicate the transmission of the true knowledge of God to man. Metaphors far exceed in depth and richness a mere substitution of the abstract with the literal.

The use of allegory contains an interpretative plurality, where the text can grow with the reader. His opponents claimed such pluralism might mislead the catechumens; however, Clement criticizes their pessimistic view of the human person. Clement holds a high view of humanity — "a plant of heavenly origin" — led according by faith from the inertia wrought by gnosis, as learning untethered from the practical example. In the same way that an athlete follows prescribed training, so a catechumen is exhorted to perfect what is being taught. For Clement, the most profound realities are not immediately apprehended by the intellect. Being veiled, they are expressed through symbols.

Clement employed allegory to weave a tapestry of Scripture, in order to universalize the seed of truth concealed in culture. Scripture, which possesses supreme authority and mysterious form, is the basis for Clement's catechetical method. The incarnate Logos has entered history and in so doing condescended to allegory, parable and symbol. For example, Clement presents the Deuteronomic entrance of the high priest into the holies of holies as an allegory of degrees of religious experience, to argue that aesthetic perception is the highest form of knowledge.

Clement's novel exegetical approach was developed further by numerous Greek fathers, notably Origen, but later Gregory of Nyssa and Evagrius of Pontus. Symbolic, metaphorical language is necessary to transmit knowledge about reality which lies beyond human perception. Closely approximating the heavenly kingdom, whose habitation is the reward for the moral labor, the educator reinforces the rationale for such focus.

The Pedagogy of the Logos

The question of "how" to teach, or pedagogy in formal terms, is predicated on the "why," namely: on what basis should something be taught? A problem arises then, when relativism, which denies the possibility of absolute truth claims and moral judgments, is tasked with constructing a pedagogy. If there is no indissoluble "why," then there can be no corresponding "how." Thus the theory of education and pedagogy descends into crisis, where each successive school and thought system invariably outlines the crisis in their own terms and builds up a replacement ideology and system of education. The myriad of trends and theories of education implemented and then jettisoned over the past century testify to this truth. Clement "Christianized" existing pedagogical ideas to describe the divine Word, who is both Instructor and Teacher. Clement viewed Christian education as fundamentally charismatic, insofar as the divine illumination is foremost infused by the Holy Spirit, the "Inner teacher." Concerning the role of the catechetical method (science of transmission), Clement intimates a special relationship between the divine word uttered by the catechist into, and throughout language, and the word sown hidden in the soul of the learner.

Furthermore, Clement compares pedagogical resources to the diet of an athlete who must not indulge in luxury since he entertains a noble desire for distinction. A little knowledge is dangerous and Clement, like Plato before him, cautioned fledgling catechumens from reading, and being harmed by, his more advanced teaching. For this reason, Clement wrote his works intended for a mature audience in a deliberately obscure style. Clement highlights the importance of sequenced catechesis, and echoes the Pauline exhortation to move from "milk" to "solid food" (1 Cor. 3:2), beginning with evangelistic exhortation, moral instruction, and culminating in the mystical experience. The clear sequence embodies Clement's teaching on the "pedagogy of the Logos," with its emphasis on progressive revelation. As a physical ailment demands the attention of a physician, so the spiritually ill require a spiritual instructor, for the passions to be healed, so that the person might freely enter the catechetical school, purifying the soul ready for knowledge of the revelation of the Word.

Clement frames his instruction in terms of spiritual progress, and sees the Christian life as an exacting but joyful discipline. He steers a clear course away from the Pelagian heresy of perfectionism, but takes seriously the Biblical exhortation to strive for perfection. Such progression, he teaches, is facilitated by moral discipline, intellectual training, and imitation of the works of divine love. In the Old Testament, God uses reproof to cure the passions of the soul. This divine pedagogy leads the catechumen toward an integrated theology through the two distinct stages of "faith" and "knowledge," whereby the latter perfects the former. The Divine Pedagogue, Clement asserts, desires to move the person from "faith" toward "knowledge," a movement which entails grappling with philosophy, and also discovering the deeper meaning of Scripture.

A tenet of Clement's theory of knowledge was the pedagogy of the Logos. In this model the catechist functions in persona Christi, insofar as faith is not transmitted by another person, but by the Word Himself as divine Educator. The encounter with Christ explains why the initial stage of education is the release of vices, which fail to recognize the divine knowledge and usurp it. The catechist prescribes conduct, advice, and encouragement, ordered toward the release of the soul from the grasp of the passions. To Clement, Christ is foremost understood as the Johannine Logos: the divine teacher reveals the path to communion with God.

Paul personified the Law as a "disciplinarian" to the Galatians, a stopgap until the promised Messiah. Insofar as philosophy constituted a divine covenant with the Greeks, so the Mosaic Law was a covenant with the Jews (namely, it functioned as a backdrop upon which the Gospel could be transposed). The Incarnation of Christ crowns Greek philosophy, by which the Gospel itself is more readily understood. The implication is that the contemporary catechist cannot transmit the Gospel without considering what "covenant" existed between God and that group of people, as a precursor to the Gospel. Training and teaching is central to Clement's explication of Christianity, where Christ is the only one able to expound and enforce His precepts.

In his confidence in the seed-form of truth discernible within pagan myth, Clement lays a theological foundation for Tolkien, himself a catechist par excellence, for whom it has been noted that: "Pagan myths were, in fact, God expressing Himself through the minds of poets, using their 'mythopoeia' to reveal fragments of His eternal truth."4 Tolkien's fictional world does not represent an escape from reality, but rather a flight into (metaphysical) reality."5 Storytelling becomes a rational activity when myth is the most intelligible mode of expression for a given transcendent truth. Human creativity is co-creation with the divine, properly expressed by the artist in what Tolkien termed "sub-creation." One of the many things that distinguishes the good from evil is creative capacity (indeed diabolic "creativity" can only invert, in order to parody, the good). As Picasso said, the artist first finds and only then seeks. Of supreme relevance for the contemporary catechist is Clement's understanding (through the widespread reliance upon induction and allegory) that one first sees (or hears), and only then questions how and why.

Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God, even as salvation comes through recognition of the divine Logos. As the supreme teacher, the Logos has a comprehensive plan for the education and salvation of all humanity. Clement describes Christ as the teacher par excellence and refers to himself in humble terms as merely a pedagogue — a residential tutor in the ancient world. Clement's interpretation of Christ as the teacher par excellence whose mission was to train humanity to perfection, was influenced by his interpretation of theology in light of Greek ideas of education. Therefore, while all people are created in the image and likeness of God, the catechist especially shares in the execution of the divine plan for salvation. Education imbibes a certain intimate fellowship between master and disciple, in morality, spirit, and intellect. The catechist serves to oversee the acquisition of intellectual understanding of, in order to properly sustain, what was first assented to by faith. Thus it is the role of the catechist to reduce the distance between the mystery as accepted by the heart, and the rationale as demanded by the mind.

Eric Osborn, Clement of Alexandria (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 368. ↩

W.H. Oliver, "Influence of the Catechetical School of Alexandria on the growth and development of Christianity in Africa," DTh thesis, Dept. of Christian Spirituality, Church History and Missiology, UNISA, 2016. ↩

J. L. Kovacs, "Divine Pedagogy and the Gnostic Teacher according to Clement of Alexandria," JECS 9 (2001), 3—25. ↩

Joseph Pearce, Tolkien: Man and Myth (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 59. ↩

Joseph Pearce, "Tolkien and the Catholic Literary Revival," Tolkien: A Celebration: Collected Writings on a Literary Legacy, ed. Joseph Pearce (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 108. ↩