

## THE SURVIVAL OF THE GREEK GODS IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

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### ABSTRACT

From what we know of the historical sources, the Hellenistic period in the ancient Near East (more specifically ancient Israel), can be divided into four uneven phases. The first was the conquest of Palestine by Alexander the Great's armies and the ensuing wars of succession (332-296 BC). The second and more important phase was the rule of the Egyptian Ptolemaic dynasty in 296-201 BC. This phase was followed by the Seleucids of Syria, who also ruled the country for approximately 100 years (200-104 BC) and the fourth and last phase of the Hellenistic period, which at the ancient Semitic city of Dor, lasted just forty years but has left almost no record, was the period of Hasmonean domination of the northern coastal region in 104-64/3. The excavations at Tel Dor and many other sites in Israel contribute substantially to our knowledge of the history of the cities and of the region in general, and are particularly important for understanding the final stages in the transformation of many cities in Israel into fully Greek cities. The Semitic people were heavily influenced by Greek culture. All the religious artefacts – clay figurines, stone statues, and incense altars – are taken from the Greco-Roman pantheon. The ancient Near East offered a suitable environment where various religious beliefs expressed in many artistic forms were interwoven. Christianity came into being in Palestine, a province of the Greco-Roman Empire. By 400 AD the Catholic Church was largely identified with the Roman state. What influence did the different religions like Greco/Roman religion have on ancient Israel and eventually Christianity? Were they swept away, or were they raised to a new level (Wessels 1994:14)? What changes did the newly-brought, translated Christian faith undergo under the influence of these cultures and religions? How did Christianity and Christian faith combine with pre-Christian culture and religion?

### INTRODUCTION

Israelite religion was “born” after a long and bitter struggle with Canaanite culture that affected every aspect of life. The conflict between the worshippers of Ba'al and Yahweh-worshippers was no sham battle. The triumph of the God

of Israel was assured but a crisis threatened Israel's faith and indeed her very existence for centuries. In a number of its features the so-called Israelite religion scarcely differed from the fertility religions of greater Canaan and in many quarters the cult of Yahweh was half pagan, not only in the period of the Judges but even until the end of the monarchy (Dever 1990:127-128).

From what we know of the historical sources, the Hellenistic period in the Ancient Near East (specifically ancient Israel<sup>1</sup>), can be divided into four uneven phases (Stern 2000:201). The first was the conquest of Palestine by Alexander the Great's armies and the ensuing wars of succession (332-296 BC). The second and more important phase was the rule of the Egyptian Ptolemaic dynasty in 296-201 BC. This phase was followed by the Seleucids of Syria, who also ruled the country for approximately 100 years (200-104 BC) and the fourth and last phase of the Hellenistic period, which for example at the ancient Semitic city of Dor, lasted just forty years but left almost no record, was the period of Hasmonean domination of the northern coastal region in 104-64/3 AD (Stern 2000:201).

Christianity came into being in Palestine, a province of the Greco-Roman Empire. But, we can also say that Christianity was 'born' after a long and bitter struggle (with Judaism) and the Greco-Roman gods/culture which affected every aspect of life. By 400 AD the Catholic Church was largely identified with the Roman state. "The roots of the Christian movement were obviously the Hebrew Bible;<sup>2</sup> and Christians claim to be the authentic continuation of ancient Israel". This claim led to tension with emergent Rabbinic Judaism (Attridge 1992:163). Attridge explains that "one of the paramount aims of Christianity"

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<sup>1</sup> The use of the term "ancient Israel" in this study is in no way intending to oversimplify what is an intensely complex issue. It refers to "a socio-cultural polity", "an ethnic designation for the community" who settled in the highlands, and not to a geographic region (Miller 2005:1; cf. Dearman 1992:34; Dever 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Particularly in the Exilic and Hellenistic periods Judaism undeniably absorbed numerous foreign influences or perhaps stimuli (Hengel 2005:86).

was to define itself against Judaism. This article does not deny the influence and importance of early Judaism in the development of Christianity but it will not be dealt with here.

The focus of this article however, will be on the possible effect which the Greek gods had on the myths and practices of early Christianity. The idea is not to give a thorough examination of all fused Greco-Roman divinities in the Near East, but just to record some of the religious artefacts and cultic remains mainly found at Hellenistic Dor (in Israel; cf. e.g. Scheffler 2000, for the Greco-Roman remains at Siphoris). The question is in what way did the Catholic Church “translate” the Christian “gospel” into the Greco-Roman context? In what way can we talk of the interaction between the Christian message and the Greco-Roman culture?<sup>3</sup>

## THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

The excavations at Tel Dor and many other sites in Israel contribute

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<sup>3</sup> Hillgarth says (1986:65): “Christianity recorded its greatest initial success in the Roman Empire by assimilating to itself so much of the Graeco-Roman culture ...” The original story of Christianity, the New Testament has been handed down in Greek, not Aramaic. The Christian mission was addressed in the first phase to Hellenized Jews. Only a few expressions stayed in Jesus’ mother tongue. For example: Matthews 27:46, taken from Psalm 22: “Eli, eli, lama sabachtani” – “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Cf. also Mk 7:34; Mk 5:41; Mk 14:36; Gal 4:6; Rm 8:15; 1 Cor 16:22). After this translation, the gospel of Jesus was immediately coloured by a new context – different from its original Aramaic context. Again, Greek, not Hebrew was the mother tongue of the Jews in the Diaspora (Wessels 1994:7-14). Therefore, in Egypt, the Old Testament was similarly translated into Greek and became known as the Septuagint. With the Greek translation of the Old Testament, certain associations of Hebrew words were lost (Dodd 1964:xi, 25, 223-295). The Greek translations e.g. tried to remove all traces of polytheism from the Hebrew text. Thus anthropomorphic expressions are avoided in talk about God (Dodd 1964), for example the “hand” of the Lord is translated “power”. There is also less talk about the suffering of God. It is, however, on the basis of Septuagint piety that Judaism developed into a universal missionary religion (Wessels 1994:15-21).

substantially to our knowledge of the history of the cities and of the region in general, and are particularly important for understanding the final stages in the transformation of many cities in Israel into full-blown Greek cities (Stern 2000:201).

The excavation results support the hypothesis on an unbroken Hellenistic civilization in many Israelite cities during this period – in town planning, the system of roads and drainage, in the style and detail of building, and especially the temples and cultic remains.

At Hellenistic Dor for example, two large temples were discovered by Garstung on the western seashore, and Claudine Dauphin excavated another temple, east of the city, beneath a Byzantine church (Stern 2000:246). Unfortunately the two temples were totally empty and we do not know which deities were worshiped there. We can only guess that Doros, the son of the sea god Poseidon, was one of them. All the religious artefacts – clay figurines, stone statues, and incense altars – are taken from the Greco-Roman pantheon (Stern 2000:246; Figure 223).

In the earliest group of figurines of the Hellenistic period is a relatively large figurine, of which only the head of a child Eros and a large bird have survived (Stern 2000:245-246; Figure 167). Stern reports that figurines of clay and other materials depicting children and babies at play – with no religious meanings – were found in temples elsewhere, but the figurine fragment from Dor must have been one of many that graced private dwellings in the city and which may have been deposited as votive offerings in the sanctuaries. Many Phoenician clay figurines of the Egyptian god Bes were found in the Persian period strata at Dor. In the Greek period too, Bes was a favourite motif of clay and faience figurines. Other popular figures were heads of satyrs and the god Pan (Stern 2000:250, Figure 171).

Most of the clay figurines found at Dor are of Greek goddesses (Figure 165, Stern 2000:244): A statuette of a naked woman (without a head), ‘tying her

hair' – possibly Astarte-Aphrodite was found in a cave opposite Mount Carmel opposite Dor; Tyche-Astarte with a wall-like crown and the head of a figurine that is so beautiful that it must be an Aphrodite (Greek goddess of beauty; Stern 2000:247). The women's faces and intricate hair-styling that probably reflects the prevailing fashion are competently modelled (Stern 2000:247). Thus far it seems as though the Greek goddesses tended to have survived the turmoil at Dor much more than the gods.

A clear fusion of religious traditions took place in many places in the ancient Near East. Christides (2003:68; cf. Attridge 1992:154) refers to a relief found in the city of Palmyra (first century AD), in the Syrian desert, depicting a woman seated on a cushioned throne wearing a "calathos" in the form of a turreted city wall and dressed in a long tunic. Beside her another female appears, dressed in a similar fashion and wearing the same type of "calathos". Some scholars consider the seated figure as the goddess Ishtar-Astarte and her companion Tyche. Tyche (Fortune), an orientalised painting of Eutyichides' (from Antioch) appears in the temple of Palmyrene gods in Dura Europos bearing the name "Tyche of Palmyrene" (Rostovtzeff 1938, in Christides 2003:69; cf. Attridge 1992:154). Christides (2003:79) concludes that the Near East offered a suitable environment where various religious beliefs expressed in many artistic forms were interwoven. He states that "those beliefs were not imposed on the local population, but selectively chosen by it and mixed with local religious traditions".

However, to return to the excavations at Tel Dor, the most impressive find from Dor is without question the head of the Greek god Hermes, messenger of the gods, carved in marble (Stern 2000:247). His face and hair were rendered in the finest detail. The head was apparently not mounted on a body, but on a post which was set in courtyards of gardens to protect the inhabitants. In addition, a fragment of a stone foot wearing the winged sandal of Hermes was also found at another place. A fragment of a stone statue from a sculptural group depicts

Horus rowing a boat on the Nile (Stern 2000:248; Figure 169).

The destruction of the Hellenistic layer in different ancient Near Eastern sites does not mean that a destruction of ideologies took place, or that a fusion of religious beliefs did not take place.

## **EARLY CHRISTIANITY**

Between the destruction of Jerusalem by Rome in 70 CE and the Constantine adoption of Christianity in 312 CE the Christian movement gradually defined itself over against the people of Israel from which it had emerged and in tension with the larger Hellenistic-Roman society of which it became an increasingly important part (Attridge 1992:151-153).

According to Shanks (1992: 313-320) the first century CE was clearly the most important in both Judaism and Christianity, since origins dictate the spirit of a movement. Three significant Jews – Philo, Paul and Josephus – should be mentioned in this regard. They provide important data regarding customs, festivals, historical events and the evolving and dynamic world of Early Judaism and Christianity. In the period from 70 to 132 Christianity and Judaism became centralised. The teachings of Jesus, as remembered by his followers were collected into the first gospels. Judaism moved toward rabbinic Judaism with emphasis on the themes found in the Mishna, which was taking shape during this period.

The next most important century (for Christianity) was the fourth, since in it the mentality of Christianity was clarified (cf. Shanks 1992:320). In 313 Constantine the Great (c. 288-337) declared all religions free from Roman persecution; in 325 at Nicaea Constantine summoned the leaders of the Church and demanded them to define the essence of Christianity and in 367 Athanasius, an influential man, wrote a festal letter that listed, for the first time, the 27

books of the New Testament and in the order known today.

### **The Church Fathers**

As far as the Greco-Roman influence is concerned, the initial attitude of Christians towards the Greek mythology was both positive and negative (Wessels 1994:21-30). The church fathers looked at the Greco-Roman gods and their myths from two perspectives: 1) demonisation of these gods, and 2) rationalisation. For demonisation, reference is made to biblical passages such as Deuteronomy 32:17 and 1 Corinthians 8:24f. Wessels (1994:24) shows how a pagan “enlightenment” movement was of great importance for the rise of Christianity: 1) polytheism was undermined from within and made ripe for replacement with monotheism; 2) this movement gave Christians an arsenal for fighting polytheism; and 3) positive ideas from Greek and above all Stoic philosophy were taken up by Christians to support their own view of God and this made it more acceptable for the educated.

On the one hand Christian writers deal very critically with myths – but they were also brought on to a new level. There were many arguments against mythology which Christians made grateful use of. The gods were mortal, vulnerable and subject to passions. The first philosopher to attack all-too-human ideas of the gods and the stories about them was Xenophanes of Colophon (580/577 – 485/480 BCE). He mocked the world of Homer’s gods for their all-too-human conduct – they steal, commit adultery and threaten like human beings (Wessels 1994:21-30).

The church father Tertullian (c.160-220) hopes that pagans will yield to such proofs, like the fact that the tomb of Zeus (Jupiter, the supreme god), can be found on Crete, that of Chronos in the Caucasus, of Ares in Thrace, of Hermes (Mercury, the messenger of the gods) in Egypt and of Aphrodite (goddess of beauty) on Cyprus. The conclusion the church fathers drew was that

all gods were formerly human beings who were divinized (quoted by Bonnefoy, *Mythologies* [n.29], 667, 669, in Wessels 1994:29; Attridge 1992:155). When Christianity entered the Greco-Roman world, it found the worship of many gods in its way. That put Christianity in a position of rivalry. Some of the gods became the counterparts of Christ and some even become saints in the Roman Catholic Church.

The figure of Odysseus can be mentioned as an illustration of this Christian use of mythology. The church fathers constantly applied imagery drawn from the voyage of Odysseus to the church or the Christian life (Wessels 1994:32).

Orpheus was known in Greek mythology as the mythical singer and poet. The figure of Orpheus had already been taken over from the Greco-Roman art by the Jews in Dura Europos (in Syria). In Judaism he was a symbol of the golden age and took on a messianic significance (Wessels 1994:35). The church in the Greco-Roman world also had no problem connecting Orpheus with Christ (Wessels 1994:34-36). In the catacombs in Rome, Christ is depicted as a shepherd, a teacher and as the singer Orpheus. As a “good shepherd” Orpheus became a kind of symbol of Christ (Wessels 1994:35, 36).<sup>4</sup>

The shepherd with a sheep on his shoulder depicts safe homecoming after the journey of death – this image is found around 240 in the earliest catacombs of Lucina (Van der Meer 1989:29, 35).

Coulton (1953:323) says the ‘pagan origin of the symbolism in the catacombs is certain’. It was Greek mythology which created the decorative element for the tombs of the first martyrs.

Interestingly, again from a pre-Christian period, “Orpheus” turned up at an excavation site in Israel. A marble statue of the “good shepherd” was found at *el-Mina* near Gaza, in Israel. This “good shepherd” with a lamb on his shoulder

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<sup>4</sup> Jesus was already called the Good Shepherd both by himself (John 10:11) and his followers in the New Testament (Heb 13:20; cf. Attridge 1992:152). This metaphor is also used for God in the Old Testament.



goes back to pre-Christian art, and becomes the vehicle of a biblical context.

Wessels (1994:36) mentions another feature connected with Orpheus – the use of the symbol of a fish with reference to Jesus. From the third or fourth century before Christ, Orpheus is depicted as a “fisher of men”. That is an old motif which predates Christianity. Christ is depicted in the catacombs as a fish: *ichthys* – the initials for the Greek for fish – are read as “Jesus, Christ, Son of God, Saviour” (Wessels 1994:36; cf. Cameron 2003).

When Christianity entered the Greco-Roman world it encountered the worship of Asclepius, son of Apollo, the god of healing. That put Christianity in a position of rivalry. Asclepius became a counterpart of Christ (Wessels 1994:37; cf. Sanders 1992:74). Jesus was called Saviour and Redeemer – just like Asclepius. The similarities between the two are striking. Asclepius is the son of god, who in his earthly life heals the sick, at times by laying on of hands, raises the dead, himself undergoes death as punishment, is taken into heaven and appears alive to believers on earth.

The contrast between Asclepius and Jesus took form among the apologists: Justin Martyn says: ‘Christ surpasses Asclepius.’ Asclepius is seen as a demon. Tertullian says he was a bad doctor who killed more patients than he cured. According to Clement he was a doctor greedy for gold who was rightly struck by lightning. In Rome the temple of Asclepius is found on the island Tiber. Several temples of Asclepius later even became Christian churches (Wessels 1994:37).

### **Christmas and Mithras**

Wessels (1994:41) illustrates from Christmas, how in the Greco-Roman context this festival of the birth of Jesus came to be combined in a specific way with the feast of Mithras (the Invincible Sun). *Sol Invictus* was officially recognised as a god of the court and the Empire and from 275-323 AD he was the head of state

religion. Mithras was an Indo-Iranian god who is already mentioned in the fourteenth century BC. He was the “light bearer”, sent to earth to bring fertility. In the first century the mystery religion of the Persian Mithras spread rapidly in the West. In the Hellenistic period the feast of Mithras was held on 25 December. Mithras is the *Sol Invictus* who as an incarnation of the divine light is born in the night of the solstice. The 25th was chosen as a day of feast because in the Julian calendar the winter solstice fell on this day and it was regarded as the paramount date for the sun (Wessels 1994:41-42).

According to Wessels (1994:42) the choice of 25 December for the celebration of the Christian Christmas is of great importance for the “Roman” interpretation of the Christian faith. The festival, which was first that of *Sol Invictus* on 25 December, now became the date for the festival of the birth of Christ. It seems certain that Christmas was celebrated in Rome on this date from 336 AD.<sup>5</sup> The foundation for the connection between Christmas and the festival of the unconquerable sun is clear – Christ is likened to the sun, especially the rising sun. On more than one occasion Jesus is spoken of in this way, for example in the hymn of Zechariah (Luke 1:78, 79) and as the “light that shines in the darkness” (John 1:5). Further, a star announced the birth of Jesus (Mt 2:2). The church tried to gain control of this popular day of light by proclaiming Christ as “the new light”, the “true” and “only” sun. He was in truth “unconquered”; he himself had conquered death. He was the “sun of righteousness” which Malachi (4:2) prophesied about; he was the rising “sun of righteousness” in Christian typology, which became the slogan with which the church sought to convert worshippers of *Sol Invictus*.

The emperor Constantine the Great started to worship the God who had created the sun, in place of the god of the visible sun. On the relief on Constantine’s arch in Rome there is a depiction of Victory next to *Sol Invictus*

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Usener (1911:375, 378); Heiler (1961); Mak (1984:4, 5).

(Altheim 1957, quoted in Wessels 1994:43).

The hymn-writer Ephraem, the Syrian (306-377), wrote the following about Mary: “The sun of righteousness has risen from her, which through its rising has lightened the whole world”.

Ambrose (340-397, or Maximus of Turin, c. 350-420) states: “The people are rightly accustomed to call today’s holy birthday of our Lord ‘the new sun’ ... We should observe it willingly because with the rising of the Saviour, not only the salvation of the human race but also the brightness of the sun renews itself, as the apostle says (Eph.1:10), so that through him it renews all that is both in heaven and on earth. For as the sun darkened at Christ’s passion so it must be brighter than other lights at his birth” (Wessels 1994:43).

A Christmas prayer from the Gallican liturgy runs: “May the rising sun, the splendour of eternal light and sun of righteousness, come and lighten those who are in darkness and the shadow of death. The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light” (Wessels 1994:43).

Chrysostom (c.354-407) says: “They call the day the day of the *Invictus*. Indeed who is as unconquerable as our Lord, who has victoriously subjected death? And if they call it the birthday of the sun, now he himself is the sun of righteousness of which the prophet Malachi (4:24) has spoken”. These words were written at a time when the pagan festival was still being celebrated (in Wessels 1994:43).<sup>6</sup>

Even the origin of Hanukka (as of Christmas) is similarly to be traced back to a folk festival of lights at the period of the winter solstice. Josephus (*Ant.* XII, 7.7:325) calls the festival *phota* (“lights”), a name often encountered in contemporary writings.

The combination of the festival of Christ’s birth with the festival of

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<sup>6</sup> The expression *phos auxei*, “the light increases”, which is used in pagan liturgy on 25 December, as is evident from the Greek calendar, entered the Christmas liturgy of the church: *lux crescit* (Seznec 1972:44, 45).

the “invincible sun” illustrates what happens in this process of transformation. The interpretation of Christ as the “sun of righteousness” and the like, is directly occasioned by the Greco-Roman context already mentioned. We might ask whether this connection between Christ and the sun would otherwise have been made and the previous comparison have existed at all. This connection with Roman culture put new emphases on the interpretation of the gospel which had not been there in that form before. Only after Christ had taken the place of the pagan “*Sol Invictus*” and the festival celebrating his birth had been made to coincide with the winter solstice, did Jesus take on this central significance as “sun”. (Wessels 1994:43)

There is no indication whatsoever in the New Testament about the time of year at which his birth took place. It is increasingly said that Christ is the real Helios, the “sun god”. In different texts he is called “Sol”, “the true spiritual sun”, the “sun of resurrection”, the “sun of righteousness”, the Saviour expected “as the light that comes from above”. In the long run, moreover, Christians did not celebrate the Sabbath, but Sunday, *dies solis*, on which they commemorated the resurrection (Wessels 1994:43, 44).

One may assume that the Helios of the catacomb of Pietro and Marcellino is to be seen as a symbol of Christ (Stützer 1983:47, quoted in Wessels 1994:45). As Rahner puts it, the young church brought Helios home (1963:93ff.). In the mausoleum below St Peter’s in Rome there is a picture of Christ Helios, rising from Hades to his Father. Here a link is made between the Christian statement “descended into hell” and this non-Christian image (Wessels 1994:45).<sup>7</sup>

Close parallels between the celebration of the Christian Eucharist and the

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<sup>7</sup> In the Netherlands and Sweden it is hard to deny that Christmas has also displaced the feast of Yule and taken over many of its customs (Wessels 1994:148-149).

cult of Mithras can be noted. In this regard Mithras was a dangerous rival of Christianity and it took a long time before he was defeated (Drewermann 1987:466).

## CONCLUSION

This investigation highlights the fact that Christianity scarcely differed from the myths and religions of the Greco-Roman world and in many quarters the Christian religion is half pagan – as in ancient Israelite religion (even so today).

Rahner considers that the church claimed the best of the Greek heritage; it “firmly and kindly corrected its errors” and “safeguarded” eternal riches amidst the ruins of the temples. As he puts it, the church brought the Greek gods “home” (1963:353-371). The reinterpretation of Christmas and the way in which the sacraments are celebrated have their models in such a distinctive Greco-Roman contribution. The Greco-Roman culture was both rejected and elevated to a higher plane in the early church.<sup>8</sup> As Wessels (1994:49) puts it: “From its first appearance Christianity made efforts to suppress and slander the pagan myths and gods in the name of its own message, but that does not alter the fact that the church also sought some correction in the sphere of myth. We do not only find rejection of idolatry, demonisation of the gods who were previously believed in, but at the same time inspiration through images and stores like those of Odysseus, Orpheus and Asclepius. Through a Christ

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<sup>8</sup> Wessels (1994:38, 39) states that this “example of the relationship between the belief in Jesus Christ and belief in Asclepius illustrates what happens in this process of encounter between Christianity and the Graeco-Roman culture”. Certain elements which are clearly present in the gospel, like the healing activities of Jesus Christ, take on special accent and enrichment by comparison with the original understanding of the New Testament text. On the one hand Christian apologists objected to the mystery religions, but on the other hand they believed that it had similarities to Christianity itself: the aim of worshipping a pure God, the aim of living a pure life, and the aim of cultivating the spirit of brotherhood (Hatch 1895:283, 284).

interpretation, pagan gods increasingly came to be as it was equal partners with the biblical figures". Rahner (1963:xv, xxi) has pointed out that God spoke his revelation in the world of the Greek spirit and the Roman Empire. The ancient Near East offered a fertile environment where various religious beliefs expressed in many artistic forms were interwoven. Eliade sees the secret of the success of the spread of Christianity in Europe as being the church's success in taking over the images and myths of Europe and raising them to a higher level (1961:160, 161). Pre-Christian elements were clearly preserved and raised to a new level. Christianity did not bring a new culture, but renewed, rejuvenated and purged the Greco-Roman culture (Russels, in Wessels 1994:50, 51). It is clear that the presence of the Greeks and the Greek gods in ancient Israel had a major influence on the development of Christianity.

African, Asian and Latin American theologians often do not pass the test of what is thought to be "universal" theology – the theology practiced by Westerners – and are often dismissed by European theologians as "syncretistic". They are felt to make too many concessions to their own cultural context. Wessels (1994:15) is convinced that one of the reasons why European theologians find it so difficult to assess African, Asian and Latin American contributions to theology is that the former are unaware of the question of their own contextualisation, above all in the sense of their enculturation into European culture.

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