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A. Murphy. Hellenistic tradition

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Présentation de la fiche

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Hellenistic Traditions

The early Christian propagandists made a distinction between preaching and teaching. In this, they were influenced by the methods for making converts in vogue among the exponents of late Judaism. They also employed the techniques used by the wandering philosophers and moralists, particularly the Stoics, Epicureans, and Pythagoreans, who went from town to town throughout the Roman Empire, laying down a strict code of moral conduct whose aim was a reasonable approach to the problems of daily life. There were numerous instances in which both the Jewish and the Stoic moral teaching were in agreement. Hence it was but normal that they should have employed similar methods in outlining behavior patterns.

Describing the elements of a liberal education, the Roman biographer and Stoic, Plutarch, maintained: "With wisdom and through her, it is given to know the beautiful and the shameful, the just and unjust; what to accept and what should be avoided . . . Wisdom prescribes reverence for the gods, honor for parents, respect for elders, obedience to the laws, submission to the magistrates, love for friends, wise and reserved conduct with women, the cherishing of children, and that one should never get incensed with slaves" (*On a Liberal Education*, 10). Though thoroughly sophisticated, the ethical concepts of this document are not far removed from what is probably the earliest, non-scriptural Christian document, though it is definitely a reworked Jewish technique, called the *Didache* or Teaching of the Twelve Apostles. It begins with the ancient moral doctrine of the Two Ways.

Two ways there are, one of life and one of death, and there is a great difference between the two ways. Now the way of life is this: love the God who made you; and secondly, love your neighbor as yourself. (ACW 6.15)

The treatise then describes this way of life in minute detail:

Bless those who curse you, pray for your enemies, be generous

The Culmination of Religious Traditions

to the poor . . . On the other hand, the way of death is wicked and altogether cursed: it consists in murders, adulteries, lustful desires, fornication, thefts, idolatries, magical arts, sorceries, robberies, false testimonies, hypocrisy, duplicity, fraud, pride, malice and foul talk.

This technique, and the doctrine it expressed, was common to the pagan, Jewish, and Christian ethical teaching. It witnesses to a considerable rivalry or competition for converts and disciples among the numerous philosophical and religious movements in the Roman Empire at the moment when Christianity appeared.

By the time of Christ, Jewish ethical thought had been modified to a considerable degree. This was due to contact with Graeco-Roman society, both in the colonies of Jews living outside Palestine, referred to as the *diaspora*, and in the literature and teaching of the local rabbis of our Lord's own time. It had also been colored by the moralistic tendencies of semi-orthodox ascetic movements and other breakaway religious groups such as the Essenes and the devotees of the Damascus and Qumran sects. Many of their literary productions have been discovered in recent years.

Christ's Supernatural Orientation

Early Christian moral teaching reflected this atmosphere. Yet while the substance of the Sermon on the Mount and the two commandments of the love of God and of neighbor are found literally in the Old Testament (Deut 6.5 and Lev 19.18), the originality of Christ's teaching is certified by its uniquely supernatural orientation, and by the absolute authority with which he announced his ethical doctrines. By his claim to be the Son of God, by his insistence on the fact that he was "the Way, the Truth, and the Life" (Jn 14.6), by his invitation to his followers to do penance and to imitate his patience and humility (Mt 11.29), and by his proclamation of his ethical requirements in an eschatological setting, Christ gave a revolutionary impulse to his teach-

