

## **In Matters of Faith: Christianity vs. Stoicism**

Kevin Miller

**Course:** HONR 311

**Instructor:** Dr. Jim Walter

**Essay Type:** Research Paper

### **Introduction**

Over the course of human history every society, even the most culturally isolated of civilizations, has developed some form of faith-system for interpreting and understanding the spiritual and material worlds. Thousands of such systems have existed over the centuries, and as tribes and cultures expanded, these faith-systems inevitably met each other face-to-face and clashed. Two thousand years ago there was a particularly important collision; one between the Roman stoic and the gentile Christian. At this time in Western civilization, Christianity was just planting its seeds and beginning to grow, whereas stoicism was already legitimate in its foundation and strong in its following (Stavrianos 100). One might wonder how Christianity ultimately replaced stoicism as the prominent and official religion in Rome. There are a few particular political and historical events that tell us exactly when and how it happened, but the curious man is more concerned with the psychology behind the transition. In other words, *why* would men tend to prefer one over the other?

Before one can explain this, it is necessary to understand fully the particulars of each system. In general, most faith systems can be understood in three parts: logic, physics, and ethics. There is a famous garden metaphor for understanding the relationship among the three. One should imagine a walled garden where inside there grows a single plant. This plant produces a fruit. Metaphorically, the wall symbolizes logic, the plant represents physics and the fruit symbolizes ethics. Accordingly, the wall of logic protects physics and ethics. Ethics is the fruit

that results from studying physics, which is the cosmic order of things. Ethics also teach us how to preserve and live in harmony with the natural order. Using this blueprint, one can examine both Christianity and stoicism in terms of their respective rules of logic, physics, and ethics. In doing so, some fundamental conclusions can be drawn pertaining to the eventual succession of Christianity over stoic thought.

### **Christianity and Stoicism: Logic, Physics, and Ethics**

In terms of logic, Christianity can be understood in three parts. Initially, there is the undeniable doctrine of "the Trinity," which teaches that God, as revealed in the Old and New Testaments, actually exists in three persons. In essence, God is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit all at once. However, Jesus is not the Father, nor is he the Holy Spirit; He is separate, and yet they are all God. Mathematically this makes no sense. If one considers that  $God=A$ ,  $God=B$ , and  $God=C$ , it logically follows that  $A=B=C$ . An intellectually honest person questions if the Trinity is truly logic at all. As a matter of fact, this particular dogma has no true Biblical origin. The concept of the Trinity does not even arise until the formation of the Nicene Creed (Metzger 90). This is interesting to note though, for it was primarily used to falsify the so-called "heretical" systems that rivaled it (Metzger 782). A second main tenant of Christian logic is the idea that the Bible is inerrant. In other words, all scripture is "God-breathed," and as such, what is written was done so in accordance with His will, and thus, must be true (2Tim 3:16). This argument is often used to support a particular line of scripture. If I, for instance, were a person who disliked homosexuals, I could point to a particular verse in Leviticus that outlaws its practices as proof that homosexuality is not the will of God. This simplistic type of literalism survived and continues to flourish within Christian circles today. And finally, there is the Christian belief in eternal life. This particular element of logic is quite simple to comprehend; for

it parallels the Judeo-Christian and Islamic slant that so much of the Western world is already familiar with. Basically, the underlying principle here is one of immortality. All men will die, but our souls will live on forever. Seeing as we have only one life to live, and the eternal resting place of our souls is determined by this life, one might foresee the obvious relevance that this point of Christian logic will have in relation to its ethics.

When one studies stoic logic, there are several main points of emphasis that should be examined. While much of the influence on stoic logic can be traced back to the classical philosophers, the stoics did formulate a few innovative and significant assumptions. The stoics believed that all knowledge entered the mind through the senses. Much like John Locke, they envisioned the mind as a blank slate upon which impressions are inscribed via the senses. Accordingly, concepts have no metaphysical reality. The stoic believed that concepts were nothing more than ideas or abstractions with no external existence. Hence, what is true is what we can sense (Murray 95). The second brick in the stoic wall of logic is derived from the previous assertion. If what is true is what we sense, then whatever we sense is true. In this context, the natural world is true and therefore reliable. And finally, this brings us to the idea of fatalism. According to the stoics, the natural world was very ordered and thus, subject to the law of cause and effect. This causality that rules the universe is impenetrable. As such, the stoics supported the deterministic argument stating that humans have no true free will. This is because every action that a human performs is merely the result of causes. To sum it up, the third rule of stoic logic states that it does one no good to go against nature, for in doing so, you are going against reason and what is true (Seneca 37).

One should take a brief look at the physics of Christianity and stoicism to see how they coexist with their relative rules of logic. As it turns out, the Christian view is less concerned with

physics than it is concerned with metaphysics. When it comes to the natural world, the early Christian would explain that everything is the creation of God. In this sense, God is *in* no matter, but all matter *is* of God. It then follows that everything has order because it was created by a God of order. In fact, God's creation of the natural world should be obvious after simply observing its beauty (Romans 1:20). This means that if God is not of matter, he must exist beyond it. In this way, the early Christians came to the conclusion that God transcends matter. But, if the metaphysical God our creator is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent, then should he not also be present in all forms? For, if God is infinite, then it follows that he should not be contained by any space, and once one finds a space that God does not fill, God ceases to be infinite. The early Christians avoided this skeptical argument by insisting that God put his Holy Spirit in everything he created, but he did not put himself there. In this way, God manages to be with us and transcend us simultaneously (Metzger 287). To reunite with this seemingly distant Christian God, one would use the Holy Spirit as a vehicle.

The stoic approach to physics is much more definitive and structured than the Christian's. Stoics believed that nothing incorporeal exists. For the stoic, all things, including the soul and God, are material. This belief is derived logically from the premise that knowledge stems from physical sensation and that reality is, in fact, the matter we sense. If we sense God, we are actually sensing something corporeal (Wenley 82-83). The stoics also believed that God related to the world in the same way the soul related to the human body. In other words, God permeates and penetrates the material world just as the soul encompasses the body. It also follows, as Seneca put it, that the soul "has a lustre that is due to no quality other than its own" (Seneca 88). What he means is that unlike the rest of the natural world, the soul is uniquely in us and not just around us. The stoics defined God as absolute reason. But, as skeptics point out, reason seems to

be a concept, and if God is a concept then He must also be incorporeal. The stoics believed, however, that reason was material. They argued that God was the *logos*, or the cosmic order; and that a main quality of this *logos* is absolute reason (Murray 103). The Stoic God seems to be something that can be tapped into from within. As humans, we have souls of reason that are attached in a corporeal sense to the world *logos*. If a human can somehow reunite with his internal soul, or with his divine spark as the Neoplatonists denned it, he will then be living "in conformity with nature." (Seneca 37).

One should now begin to notice the similarities Christianity and stoicism share, as well as the differences that individualize them. At first glance, Christian logic seems to base most of its premises on irrefutable doctrine while stoic logic seems to base most of its propositions on inference and reason. With stoicism, what you see is what you get; that which is sensed is matter, and that which is matter is true. In this way, stoicism retains a very scientific and reality-based approach to understanding the world. Stoic thought leaves no room for the supernatural. Not even God surpasses corporeality; He remains an elusive and yet material presence. On the other hand, Christianity's dogmatic approach to logic expects a person to perform whatever actions the Bible deems virtuous. There is no room for interpretation, the Bible is inerrant and thus, must be read literally. The stoic, however, advocates actions done in accordance with nature. But one might ask, how is it possible *not* to live in accordance with nature? Are not all real actions that occur in nature, by definition, also natural? The stoics would insist that we must not merely accept this natural law, but that we must also *work* with it (Clarke 35).

As far as physics goes, one finds that the Christian God is a creator as well as just a rational being in general. It then follows that the physical world created by this rational Christian God must be one that is based on His divine order and reason. This Christian God also

transcends reality, although we as humans still have a connection with His divinity through the Holy Spirit. The stoic God, however, is an inseparable part of nature just as the human soul is also inseparable from the body. The God of the stoics is the *logos*, and in a pantheistic way. He manages to exist nowhere in particular but everywhere in general (Wenley 97). The stoics taught that humans can commune with this God by exploring their own inner soul. This is interesting because here we find a striking similarity between the stoic and the Christian approach to God. Both envision a higher power that is withdrawn and yet accessible. In theory, the stoics gain access to their God by finding their inner spark, while the Christian God is accessed through the Holy Spirit.

Now that we have uncovered some of the basic logical, physical, and metaphysical elements of Christianity and stoicism we must explore their ethics. This particular section of the analysis should grant us a significant amount of insight into human psychology. For, in the case of faith systems, ethics centers around what actions are right and what actions are wrong. And in a world where wrong actions are considered vices and good actions are considered virtues, virtuous persons are expected to adhere to the strict moral code that their faith-system formulates. Knowing this, it would suffice that these particular ethical tenants might persuade or dissuade an individual's decision concerning which faith-system is ultimately followed.

The Christian system of ethics can be understood as a combination of Jesus and Paul's teachings. In His "sermon on the mount," Jesus of Nazareth formulated some very specific rules concerning what is right and what is wrong. To the crowds and to His disciples, He preached against worldly vices. He urged men to avoid lying, judging, adultery, and murder. He was also known to put great stress on acts of humility, saying such things as "everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Lk 14:6). He taught that the Holy

Spirit of God could be received if we humbled ourselves first by calling on Him. This precept is gracefully illustrated through Jesus' brilliant phraseology in the Gospel: "Ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened" (Mt 7:7-8). After we have found God, Jesus instructed that we should worship Him. We should "Love the Lord [our] God with all [our] soul and with all [our] mind and with all [our] strength" (Mk 12:30). Moreover, when Jesus was asked what type of followers His Father sought. He responded by saying, "God is Spirit, and His worshipers must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:24).

Unlike Jesus, Paul put a far less amount of emphasis on the ethics of action and worship. Instead, Paul chose to focus more on an individual's faith in the Messiah, Jesus Christ. In other words, the only really important thing that a Christian has to worry about is the strength of his personal relationship with Jesus via the Holy Spirit. This approach essentially compressed the original message, and served to simplify Christ's teachings. One can observe Paul's method of proselytization in his epistles where he said things like "a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ" (Gal 2:16). Or perhaps even more relevant was his assertion that "it is by Grace you have been saved, through faith...not by works" (Eph 2:8-9).

Whereas for Paul faith grounded ethical teaching, physics was the determinant of ethics for the stoics. Initially there was the premise that the universe is governed by natural law, and, since all life is fixed, one should learn to accept it and to deal with it. The method by which a stoic dealt with this reality involved a moderate asceticism and an extreme aloofness. This model man needed to keep his "mind devoid of feeling" (Seneca 47). Essentially, he had decided to completely tune out the external world and, in effect, keep his emotions in moderation. Another premise, was that the fundamental nature of humans is reason. Virtue was defined as living life

according to reason, so morality was simply rational actions. And, since nature is governed by reason, the stoic would lead his life "in conformity with nature" (Seneca 37). This task of living the natural life is most efficiently accomplished by following the ethical virtues of justice, wisdom, temperance and courage.

One who studies the epistles of Seneca the Younger, will notice that each of these four virtues is discussed in length. Temperance is addressed sententiously when Seneca writes that "It is not the man who has little who is poor, but the one who hankers after more" (Seneca 34). Additionally, Seneca uses slavery as a means to explain the virtue of justice. Masters should treat their slaves well, and realize that they too have a master (Seneca 90-96). Courage is seen when Seneca confronts his own imminent death: "What is death," writes Seneca, "either a transition or an end. I am not afraid of coming to an end, this being the same as never having begun, nor of transition, for I shall never be in confinement quite so cramped as I am here" (Seneca 124). The virtue that Seneca seems to give the most attention to, aside from temperance, however, is wisdom. He writes that "no one can lead a happy life, or even one that is bearable, without the pursuit of wisdom" and that "without wisdom the mind is sick" (Seneca 63,60). With wisdom being such a necessary component of the happy life, it makes sense to take a look at what Seneca meant by being wise. "The wise man is content with himself," he does not need anything outside of himself (Seneca 51). Such a man can find comfort and peace on an inner plane, for "there resides within us a divine spirit" (Seneca 86).

## **Conclusion**

The fundamental similarities and differences between stoicism and Christianity should now be clear. We have examined the roots of their logic, the formation of their physics, and the particulars of their ethics. Christianity has proven to be the more simplistic faith-system, and this

partially accounts for its relative success. As we observed, the logic and physics of Christian thought is grounded in incontestable Biblical and church doctrine; we, as humans, are not expected to understand the complex world God has created. Dante perhaps put it best in his *Paradiso* when he wrote "mindless is it that human minds can ever understand the infinite" (111:34-35). Essentially, God is infallible, and any mystery surrounding the understanding of his nature can be traced back to an error in human logic. This leaves very little room for controversy, but much room for an ecumenical standard. In this way, there could be universal order in the faith-system, plus the average practitioner was allowed to be complacent and relatively unwise. On the contrary, the stoic follower *must* be wise, otherwise he cannot achieve happiness. In this way, Christianity appeals to a larger mass of people.

In addition, Christian ethics is incredibly simple to adhere to. As long as you have faith in Jesus Christ, you really do not have to spend your entire life doing good deeds. In contrast, to be a stoic you must commit yourself to an ascetic lifestyle. Thus, Christianity is also the less lonely faith-system. To truly understand what that means, one should examine the meaning of the phrase "faith-system" to begin with. One who talks about faith-systems is usually referring to a group of people putting their faith into something metaphysical. In the case of Christianity, practitioners are putting their faith in something outside of their selves; and in doing so, are actually opening himself or herself up. In comparison, the stoic puts faith in himself. Unlike Christianity, this is not an attempt to *open up* the self, but rather to *firm it up*, and consequently, train it to be independent and alone. Christianity offered man an external deliverer from sin while stoicism offered man an internal battle against himself. It should come as no surprise that Christianity prevailed.

## Works Cited

- Alighieri, Dante. *The Divine Comedy*. Translation and Introduction by Mark Musa. New York: Penguin, 1995.
- Barker, Kenneth. *The NIV Study Bible*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995.
- Clarke, M.L. *The Roman Mind*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960.
- Metzger, Bruce M. *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*. 1993.
- Murray, Gilbert. *Stoic, Christian and Humanist*. London: C.A. Watts, 1940.
- Seneca, Lucius Annaeus. *Letters from a Stoic*. Translation and Introduction by Robin Campbell. New York: Penguin, 1969.
- Stavrianos, L.S. *A Global History: From Prehistory to the Present*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1988.
- Wenley, T.M. *Stoicism and its Influences*. New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1963.

*Kevin Miller is a Political Science major. Dr. James Walter was his professor.*

**Dr. Walter's Comments:** *Kevin's essay is a model of thoughtful condensation. Through clear and consistent analysis he succeeds in distinguishing many subtle and important differences between two very complex ways of understanding the world.*